

OSCAR WILDE'S IMAGINATIVE WORK
IN THE LIGHT OF
HIS LITERARY THEORY

by

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I

P R E F A C E

My grateful thanks are due to Professor John Butt and Dr. Ian Gregor who have supervised my studies and provided many helpful suggestions.

All quotations from Wilde's works are taken from the fourteen-volume edition, edited by Robert Ross and published in 1908. Thirteen of the volumes were published by Methuen in London, and the fourteenth, The Picture of Dorian Gray, by Charles Carrington in Paris. This is the most satisfactory 'standard' edition. The volumes are not numbered, and I list here their contents and the short titles by which I refer to them in foot-notes:

The Poems of Oscar Wilde (Poems)

A House of Pomegranates. The Happy Prince and Other Tales (Tales).

Salome. A Florentine Tragedy. Vera. (Salome).

The Duchess of Padua.

Lady Windermere's Fan (L.W.F.).

A Woman of No Importance (W.N.I.).

An Ideal Husband (I.H.)

The Importance of Being Earnest (I.B.E.).

Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Prose Pieces (L.A.S.C.).

(The other 'prose pieces' are: The Canterville Ghost, The Sphinx without a Secret, The Model Millionaire, The Portrait of Mr W. H., Poems in Prose, and The Rise of Historical Criticism, pts. I-III.)

The Picture of Dorian Gray (Dorian Gray).

Intentions and The Soul of Man (Intentions).

De Profundis.

Miscellanies. (The volume contains Essays and Criticisms, Letters, Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young, The Rise of Historical Criticism, pt. IV, La Sainte Courtisane, and Lectures.)

Reviews.

As the complete version of De Profundis was unpublished until 1962, I do not refer to it in the Methuen volume, but in the excellent volume of Letters edited by Rupert Hart-Davis. I have also referred to the original, much shorter version of The Picture of Dorian Gray published in Lippincott's Monthly Magazine in July 1890.

It is to be expected that the publication of the collected letters in 1962 will provide material for an authoritative biography, but I have found Hesketh Pearson's Life of Oscar Wilde the best at present available.

The Bibliography does not include general works of history, literature and criticism, or works of reference consulted in the course of my studies; where important, these are referred to in foot-notes: it is confined to works which have a direct bearing on Wilde and his work. Unless otherwise stated, the place of publication of all books mentioned is London.

INTRODUCTION

The relations between Oscar Wilde's literary theory and his imaginative work are curiously strong, and a relation of these relations sheds light on Wilde, both as critic and as artist. Wilde's writing has suffered by being obscured by his life-story. Not only is his life much more widely known than his work, but interest in his work has too often been biassed to relate it to his life.

The purpose of my thesis is to demonstrate the value and importance of his thought and his art, with perhaps a corrective bias against constant reference to the causes of his notoriety. In the first part, (Chapters One to Four), Wilde's literary theory is examined primarily in the context of his thinking as a whole. Chapter One is concerned to refute extreme charges of plagiarism and lack of originality, and at the same time to show which of the literary and artistic ideas of his time he accepted and developed. His literary theory is outlined in Chapter Two, and an investigation of his religious, moral and political ideas in Chapter Three shows that the ways of thinking which animate his literary theory are basic to his personality, and do not occur only in a compartment of his mind reserved for art. Chapter Four is again concerned to show Wilde's mind as a dynamic whole, and in some relation to a tradition.

The second part of the thesis is an examination of Wilde's most important works, particularly in the light of what we have

learned of his mind. The chapter on The Picture of Dorian Gray shows Wilde in action, criticising his own work in the extensive revisions he made before the novel was published in book form. It also begins to show the double effect on Wilde's work of his literary theory, which was also in a profound sense a theory or philosophy of life. The most obvious influence is his stress on the importance of form, and the supremacy of beauty, which leads to a preoccupation with style. But as well as this aim, and sometimes conflicting with it, is a constant testing of his theory of life in his works: each is shown to be in some way a demonstration of his ideas on life and art, and a criticism of these ideas.

CHAPTER ONE

Plagiarism and the Choice of Masters

In discussing a celebrated artist's ideas and creative work, it is not usually a first step to establish that the artist had ideas and did produce creative work. But Oscar Wilde was not a 'usual' man in any sense and with his work the question has been raised. His first book was Poems 1881. Shortly after their first appearance, Wilde sent a copy to the Oxford Union. Generally, acceptance of such a gift was automatic, but on this occasion Oliver Elton, then aged 20, rose to protest on the ground that Wilde was not the true author of the poems.

They are in fact by William Shakespeare, by Philip Sydney, by John Donne, by Lord Byron, by William Morris, by Algernon Swinburne, and by sixty more . . . The Union Library already contains better and fuller editions of all these poets; the volume which we are offered is theirs, not Mr. Wilde's; and I move that it be not accepted.¹

The book was refused, and Elton's charges have been upheld by later scholars. We need only cite the masterly equation to which B. Fehr reduces Wilde's longest poem of the 1881 volume:

Humanitad = Matthew Arnold + Shelley's Sensitive Plant + Pater's Schlusswort + Swinburne's Dolores + Hesperia + Eve of Revolution + A Song of Italy + Siena + Halt before Rome + Super Flumina Babylonis + Perinde ac Cadaver + Morris' Anti-Scrape Society + Pater's Winckelmann + Swinburne's Before a Crucifix + The Hymn of Man + Hertha + Baudelaire's Héauton timorounénos.²

¹Hesketh Pearson, The Life of Oscar Wilde, 1946, p. 52.

²B. Fehr, Studien zu Oscar Wilde's Gedichten, Palaestra 100, 1918, p. 132.

There were also numerous accusations of plagiarism in the lectures Wilde delivered in America and later in England. The accusations of pilfering artistic and socialistic ideas from Ruskin, Morris, the Pre-Raphaelites, Arnold and Pater have been upheld by Bendz and Bock, who enumerate many repetitions, sometimes word-for-word, of Pater and Ruskin especially. Bock has, at least by implication, linked the end of the too literal borrowing (coming, he says, with the 'Lecture to Art Students')³ and the end of the giant, even elephantine sentences, full of ill-digested ideas.⁴

There was considerable indignation at this young Oxford graduate who set himself up as a Professor of Aesthetics, and constituted himself, if not indeed the leader, certainly the mouth-piece of the Aesthetic Movement. This resentment also helped to cement the public belief that there was indeed such a united 'movement' to need a single mouth-piece. Wilde's famous 'borrowing' from Whistler over the celebrated '10 o'clock Lecture' again brought into prominence the vehement allegation. Whistler's denunciation of his erstwhile friend is only the best known of a host of outcries, notably in the heavy-handed humour of Punch. But Whistler's witty accusation has stuck, and Wilde is remembered as 'picking from our platters the plums for the pudding he peddles in the provinces'.⁵

³E. Bock, Walter Pater's Einfluss Auf Oscar Wilde, Bonner Studien zur Englischen Philologie, 1913, p. 48.

⁴Op. cit. p. 41. Bock counted the words of the sentences of The English Renaissance of Art, finding an average of 111 words per sentence, the longest having 523 words.

⁵The Gentle Art of Making Enemies, 1890, p. 164.

These are only a few of the allegations made against Wilde and they go far to explain a common dismissal of Wilde and his work as part of the imitative ephemera of the Eighties and Nineties.

Wilde has often been considered as a plagiarist with a scintillating wit, perhaps one of literature's greatest plagiarists, but, as regards criticism at least, very little more; certainly not an original critical mind of the standing of Arnold or Pater. But this view has necessarily been based either on a general impression, or on study of the detailed surveys which have up till now been undertaken on Wilde's work. Such a view must be lopsided, because of the nature of the work which has been published. Spectacular results in tracing influences have certainly been obtained, but on the whole the most spectacular have been studies of his early work.⁶

Any critic of standing draws strength from work that has gone before, sometimes techniques, sometimes principles of criticism. One question has always demanded attention for those who study the extent to which Wilde's critical thought was influenced by others. Did Wilde have an individual outlook, or was his criticism a fabricated whole, made out of a patchwork of borrowings, to which Wilde's only contribution was the linking together, and the glossing over of the fact that paradoxical ideas were being advanced simultaneously? The answer must be sought, not in his early poems and lectures, but in his mature work; in particular, as regards his critical theory, in Intentions.

⁶E. Bendz and E. Bock have traced echoes of Arnold and Pater in Wilde: B. Fehr has given an exhaustive account of literary influences in the poems, F.K. Brass of influence in Salome and Alice Herzog of influence in the fairy tales. See Bibliography.

These vehement and seemingly incontrovertible accusations make the question of influences in Wilde a vital issue, far more alive than the normal discussion of influences that finds an inconspicuous place in a dissertation on a writer. The question is quite fundamental to the *raison d'être* of this thesis. If Whistler's and Elton's charges are proved, and, more important, if all Wilde's work consisted in similar thefts from other writers, Wilde can hardly be worthy of serious discussion as an original mind.

But curious facts emerge on examination of Wilde's relations with other writers and their work. It is not the writers whose words have been found to be echoed in Wilde's work the most who have been nearest to his mind and ideas. Sometimes he repeats or copies another's work purely, it seems, because of the attraction the words and sounds have for him: sometimes, no echo of words is apparent but a close parallel in thought. Echoes and repetitions are often the most obvious form of influence, and call forth the cry of plagiarism, but more important is a far more tenuous similarity - a similarity of a basic nature between Wilde and other writers, so tenuous that it cannot be 'proved' whether Wilde took over their ideas wholesale or whether his attraction to them was a recognition of fundamental sympathy.

Plagiarism remains the charge, and must be answered. But the answer will reveal a greater complexity and depth in Wilde, it will

not be a slick denial. There can be no denying the element of truth in the main assertions, and it is more important to show that direct influence and repetition become less evident as Wilde matured, that instead of wholesale borrowing, Wilde began more and more to use his early models as starting points or inspirations for his own thought. Though an original thinker, he was not a systematic one: but gradually his own mind freed him from slavish following of other writers. In The Critic as Artist, he demonstrates in Parts I. and II. his enfranchisement from the influence of Arnold, and his own perception of the flaws in this system of criticism, and in Part II. his new-found freedom from Whistler.

With Wilde, the development of style was synonymous with the development of independent thought, and although naturally it could never be said that he was totally free of influence, the history of his work is the history of this gradual emancipation. More and more he came to the work of his fellow writers, past and present, as an equal, rather than as a pupil. Wilde says: 'The only writers who have influenced me are Keats, Flaubert, and Walter Pater, and before I came across them I had already gone more than half way to meet them'.⁷ It is hard in his mature work to disprove this claim.

⁷Pearson, p. 38.

Wilde's blatant plagiarism is in general confined to his university years and the decade following. Before and after this time (and to some extent during it, for there is no tight chronological pattern), Wilde assimilated helpful influences rather than borrowed. The two great formative influences are the Bible⁸ and the Greeks. His love of ancient Greece was deep rooted, and sealed by his visit to Greece at an impressionable age. He had a great admiration for Plato, as an artist and a philosopher, and also as a stylist in his use of dialogue, and was captivated by his charm. His love of Greek Art was general, but so was the deep influence it exercised on him: there is no question of plagiarism, but rather of eulogy, e.g. as in The Critic as Artist.⁹ In The Soul of Man under Socialism, like many men who have hated modern politics (Shelley, Byron), he was attracted by the Greek democratic ideal. The Greek ideas of sex morality harmonised with his own ideas and inclinations and, like Shakespeare's Sonnets, proved a comfort and a defence.

In his maturity Wilde developed a style which enabled him again to borrow on a massive scale, and now without any threat to his individuality. Of those mentioned above, Keats and Pater are the chief abiding influences, and far more important fundamentally than the sometimes obvious use of, for example, Huysmans' A Rebours in The Picture of Dorian Gray and the plots of Dumas fils in his plays. In the plays especially he is free to borrow what he wills,

⁸See later Chapter 3.

⁹Intentions, pp. 109 - 125 et passim.

for he is borne along to such an extent by his style and presentation that his lavish borrowing of situation and plot is immaterial. The plays are the style of the plays.

Wilde's choice of masters and influences depended to a great extent on the stage of intellectual maturity he had reached; that is, on how far he had developed his style. The writers whose works he read at Oxford almost all seemed to interest him, and to some extent to influence him. His love for the English poets was catholic, but also, for the most part, fairly modern. He admired Milton, Keats, Tennyson, Swinburne, Rossetti, and, of course Shakespeare, but seemed to remain untouched by the 'classical' authors, Dryden, Swift and Pope. He had little love for Wordsworth and though very interested in Browning¹⁰ appeared to find a lack of 'poetry' in his work, in the same sense in which Keats and Tennyson are most poetic. Romanticism appealed to him, and with his constant love of the dramatic, the mythical and faery elements of Romanticism were most important, and after Keats he admired Shelley and Byron. His favourite French poets are mostly in a similar tradition in France - Gautier and Baudelaire, who, although superficially anti-Romantic, opened out the Romanticism of evil and the dark interior of the soul.

Poets on the whole influenced Wilde more than prose writers, and the most important prose writers are all fine stylists. In poetry he loved above all the charm of words, a love which is

¹⁰Intentions, p. 105 - 108.

illustrated throughout his work. We see it particularly in his lingering over certain favourite words¹¹ and his love for splendid proper names and aristocratic titles, which cannot solely be attributed to snobbery.

It was use of words as well as ideas that thrilled him in the ornate prose of Walter Pater. The Studies in the History of the Renaissance was published in 1873 while Wilde was at Oxford, and Pater's work established its hold over him because of its beautiful style as well as its theme, which made it 'the golden book of sound and sense, the holy writ of beauty.' The prose writers he loved, Pater, Ruskin, Swinburne, Morris, showed a love of style and beauty and his French prose favourites, Gautier, Flaubert and the Goncourts, had an almost frenzied love of style and beauty.

The English novel was less important as influence, although Wilde was an avid reader. He loved Poe and the horror literature of the early nineteenth century, especially his great uncle Charles Maturin, whose novel, Melmoth the Wanderer, provided a colourful pseudonym in his later life. Among modern English novelists he had a great admiration for the style-conscious Meredith. In French fiction he revered Balzac, who perhaps of all novelists had the greatest influence on him,¹² and also Hugo and Flaubert, and he had a fondness for the straight forward historical adventure stories of Dumas.

¹¹A. Ojala, Aestheticism and Oscar Wilde, Suomalaisen Tiedeakatemian Toimituksia Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, Helsinki, 1954, II passim.

¹²See K. Hartley, Oscar Wilde. L'influence française dans son oeuvre, Paris, 1935, p. 2.

In his journalistic work he came across much that appealed to him and much that definitely did not, although he usually refrained from real condemnation. His taste became more formed, his ideas more fixed. Much of the best comment in the Reviews was reprinted in other work, notably the appreciations of both Browning and Meredith, both incorporated in The Critic as Artist. In the course of this work he came across Lefébure's book on lace¹³ which he made use of in Dorian Gray, and was introduced to the thought of Chuang Tzu whose ideas strangely appealed to him and matched his own, and later had a strong influence on his social and political ideas.¹⁴

Then there is the strange question of personality. Some writers appealed equally as persons and as writers, some in one way rather than the other. Wilde had a theory that the greatest writers were uninteresting people, and the most fascinating characters are those of bad writers. Mahaffy, his Dublin professor, who greatly influenced Wilde's love of Greece, was also a friend, and his influence is seen more in Wilde's life and character than in his work. Mahaffy's boast was that he would make a 'good pagan' out of Wilde; he also helped to make him a considerable snob. Ruskin's speech and bearing impressed the undergraduate Wilde, but beneath the flowing style of his prose Wilde found a social and moralistic leaning which was antipathetic to him, and he used Pater's writing

¹³Ernest Lefébure, Embroidery and Lace: Their Manufacture and History from the Remotest Antiquity to the Present Day. Reviewed in Woman's World, Nov. 1888.

¹⁴Chuang Tzu, Mystic, Moralist and Social Reformer, translated by H.A. Giles, 1889. Reviewed in The Speaker, February 8, 1890.

to resist the influence of Ruskin's personality.

Pater, on the other hand, was personally as much of a disappointment to Wilde as Wilde was an embarrassment to his avowed master. On the whole the personal relationship was a failure, and the friendship was kept on a literary level.

With regard to Whistler, it is interesting to note that when still a follower of Ruskin, in 1877, Wilde very condescendingly reviewed his Grosvenor Gallery Exhibitions¹⁵ but two years later when he knew Whistler personally, wrote of his 'wonderful and eccentric genius.'¹⁶ After two more years, as the acquaintance ripens, Whistler becomes 'a master of all time'.¹⁷ His comments go on blowing hot or cold, according to the state of their friendship, as Ojala points out.¹⁸

Many writers, naturally, he knew only through their work, but it is significant that when he went to France and had the opportunity to seek out his idols in the flesh, an opportunity which he seized with both hands, for his visit was a real lion hunt, he made no effort to seek out Ernest Renan. Although Renan's work, especially the Vie de Jésus¹⁹ and L'Avenir de la Science²⁰ had a great influence

¹⁵Dublin University Magazine, July, 1877.

¹⁶Miscellanies, p. 18.

¹⁷Miscellanies, p. 319 - 320.

¹⁸Op. cit. 1, 93 - 94.

¹⁹See works, especially Letters, p. 479.

²⁰I am indebted to a forthcoming article by Brian Nicholas on the connections between this work and The Soul of Man.

on Wilde, he must have known that only the ideas in Renan's work had any truth for him, and not the man, whose personality was antipathetic to him.

We can make two statements about Wilde's borrowings. First, they were extensive; he had a fantastic memory, and quotations and reminiscences fill his works - not only the Poems and Lectures, but also his later works. This is borne out by Alice Herzog's study of the Tales²¹ and F.K. Brass's account of Salome.²² But the second statement qualifies this: Wilde did not believe that there was any impropriety in borrowing. On the contrary, a work of art had no further connection with its creator: 'I appropriate what is already mine, for once a thing is published it becomes public property.'²³ Any writer could plunder ideas or quotations: in fact The Critic as Artist suggests that this is a very proper procedure; 'In a very ugly and sensible age, the arts borrow, not from life, but from each other.'²⁴ Further, Wilde himself mercilessly plundered his own work. Wilde used and re-used word or phrase, epigram or paragraph which appealed to him. The test is - can it be successfully or artistically repeated? If so repeat it.

²¹See Bibliography.

²²See Bibliography.

²³Pearson, p. 97.

²⁴Intentions, p. 78.

As far as Wilde's critical theory is concerned, influences in the shape of ideas are by far the most important. The spirit of the Nineties or the Aesthetes which Wilde was very conscious of embodying,²⁵ was most conspicuous for being 'un-English'. 'Un-English' in this sense can be taken to mean 'concerned with ideas of beauty rather than ideas of good', or aesthetic rather than moral. Among nineteenth century critics it is almost possible to make a distinction as blunt as this: the English tended to be moralists, the French to be aesthetes. In ideas then, Wilde has more in common with French or French-influenced writers. The English writers he loves for aesthetic reasons - Ruskin's powerful prose description, not his economics, Arnold's lucid, perfect English, not his artistic theories.

The most favoured English authors are those most influenced by the French - Swinburne, for example, with his adulation of Baudelaire, and Walter Pater, the disciple of Flaubert. In general these English writers delight Wilde with their use of words, French writers with their ideas. Wilde's French was good enough to appreciate also the French use of language and it is interesting to remember in this connection that Wilde wrote 'Salome' in French, as if conscious that his ideas would be more at home in the French language. But this English-French dichotomy explains the pre-eminence as a master for Wilde of Walter Pater, the jewelled English stylist, the first great English 'aesthetic' theorist.

²⁵ 'I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age.' Letters, p. 466.

To illustrate shortly Wilde's attitude to English and French thought, we can, paradoxically, compare him with two English writers, Pater as partly representing French or aesthetic ideas, Arnold as more typically English.

General English influences on Wilde have been frequently and fairly exhaustively discussed.²⁶ The most important tend to be specific and narrowed: even Pater, the major one, had a less general influence than would be supposed. Ernest Bendz has shown by close textual analysis that almost all Wilde's borrowings from Pater came from the Preface and Conclusion to the Renaissance, the end of the essay on Winckelmann, or the beginning of that on Giorgione. Wilde tends to use other critics' work as starting points for his own thought, and even when he repeats others, he usually qualifies them until the original meaning is lost.

Pater is the major influence, and Arnold influences Wilde partly directly, partly through Pater. Pater himself was early a disciple of Arnold, though, like Wilde, he tended to disregard or deny Arnold's social and ethical ideas. Both Arnold and Pater regarded Goethe as the supreme example of modern culture, and emphasised the value of actual experience.²⁷

A crucial example of the divergent thought of Arnold, Pater and Wilde is Arnold's famous dictum that 'the object of criticism

²⁶See especially Bendz, Bock.

²⁷Cf. Intentions, p. 219.

is to see the object as in itself it really is',²⁸ not 'to bring to the consideration of their object some individual fancy'. Wilde rejected the possibility of objectivity and disinterestedness, and his remark can be applied to Arnold's 'interested' disinterestedness:-

Where there is no exaggeration there is no love, and where there is no love there is no understanding. It is only about things that do not interest one that one can give a really unbiassed opinion, which is no doubt the reason why an unbiassed opinion is always absolutely valueless.²⁹

Pater makes no claims to disinterestedness as a policy: instead he restates the matter:-

In aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly.³⁰

This brings in the subjective element, firmly and inexorably - what Arnold called the 'personal estimate'.³¹

The idea of the critic not as mediator and interpreter but as an end in himself, is common to Pater and Wilde and foreign to Arnold. Wilde's statement of the same idea is characteristic: where Pater develops and perverts Arnold's meaning subtly, Wilde starts by a complete negation:-

²⁸Works: Essays in Criticism First Series (1903) - The Function of Criticism, p. 1.

²⁹Intentions, p. 195.

³⁰Pater, Preface to Renaissance, 1873, p. viii. See also Intentions, p. 70.

³¹Arnold, Essays in Criticism Second Series, 'Study of Poetry', p. 5.

Ernest: I seem to have heard another theory of Criticism.

Gilbert: Yes: it has been said by one whose gracious memory we all revere . . . that the proper aim of Criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is. But this is a very serious error, and takes no cognisance of Criticism's most perfect form, which is in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another. For the highest Criticism deals with art not as expressive but as impressive purely.³²

'His [the Critic's] sole aim is to cherish his own impressions.'³³

As soon as the idea of objectivity is rejected, much of Arnold's subsequent teaching is inevitably denied. The Critic as Artist is largely an attack on Arnold's essay The Function of Criticism: in fact, Wilde's original title for the dialogue was The true Nature and Function of Criticism. Wilde goes on to deny all Arnold's requirements for the ideal critic, that he should be fair, rational, and sincere.³⁴ Much of his space is devoted to disproving Arnold's assertion in that essay that 'Everybody, too, would be willing to admit, as a general proposition, that the critical faculty is lower than the inventive.'³⁵

³²Intentions, p. 145.

³³Ibid. p. 144.

³⁴Essays in Criticism First Series, p. 37.

³⁵Ibid. p. 3.

Pater and Wilde concentrate on the 'impression' the object makes on the critic, and so, in both cases, what matters is the temperament of the critic. 'What is important, then, is . . . that the critic should possess . . . a certain type of temperament.'³⁶ Pater described this temperament in a curiously active/passive phrase, reminiscent of Wordsworth, 'the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects'.³⁷ Where Pater's keywords are 'temperament' and 'impression', Wilde also uses 'temperament', and a favourite word for aesthetic experience is 'satisfying'.

Wilde regarded 'impressive' criticism, such as Ruskin's or Pater's, as 'criticism of the highest kind'.

It does not confine itself . . . to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final. And in this it is right, for the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul that wrought it . . .³⁸

Wilde treats art as a symbol, and it is the beholder who makes it so. 'Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything because it expresses nothing.'³⁹

These theories on the essence of criticism naturally affect Wilde's and Pater's views on the purpose of criticism. But the difference with Arnold is not so great as one would suppose.

³⁶Pater, Preface to Renaissance, p. x.

³⁷Ibid. p. x. See also Intentions, pp. 70, 200, 317.

³⁸Intentions, p. 148.

³⁹Ibid. p. 149.

Arnold regarded literature as a 'criticism of life',⁴⁰ and his idea of the critic is of the interpreter, the *raison d'être* of both art and criticism being their effect on life. Although Pater was an impressionistic critic, in practice he went further into general criticism and interpretation. His custom was to attempt to find the 'formula' of a given artist or work of art.

The function of the aesthetic critic is to distinguish, analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture . . . produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced. His end is reached when he has disengaged that virtue, and noted it, as a chemist notes some natural element, for himself and others.⁴¹

He finds, for example, that the unique quality of Coleridge is the quest for the absolute, and that of Winckelmann the Greek temperament. But finding this formula is more a matter of emotional and imaginative sympathy than of objective investigation. Usually he analyses the central quality of the artist's temperament to his own satisfaction, but he never attempted a written criticism except where real or imagined temperamental similarity allowed him to enter deeply into the spirit of the work.

Pater often says that we are all imprisoned in ourselves, that we only have our impressions, but he still believed some degree of objectivity was possible in the formula. The formula is reminiscent

⁴⁰Essays in Criticism Second Series. The Study of Poetry, p. 4.

⁴¹Pater, Preface to Renaissance, p. x.

of Arnold's 'touchstone' method,⁴² a personal and emotionally determined guide being used to provide an objective result. Pater believed that, unique as are every man's impressions, qualified observers will recognise and agree on the active principle - a recognition, implicitly, of the fundamental similarity of human minds.

Wilde differs again, emphasising that the self-culture of the critic is an end, and a more than sufficient end in itself. 'That is what the higher criticism really is, the record of one's own soul.'⁴³ But he too feels some need to explain or allow for the interpretative method of criticism. In Part 2 of The Critic as Artist he allows that the critic may sometimes interpret, but his mission is to deepen the mystery of art, not to explain it away, and he must not efface himself in interpreting but rather intensify his own personality: as the actor interprets the drama, or the violinist the concerto, so the critic interprets literature. He may choose to exert influence 'but if so he will concern himself not with the individual, but with the age.'⁴⁴ He will discover new meanings in the work especially appropriate to the age he lives in.

Both Pater and Wilde are, like Gilbert in The Critic as Artist 'born antinomians', neither can accept any creed, rule or fixed

⁴²Study of Poetry, p. 13.

⁴³Intentions, p. 144. See also Letters, p. 292. To R. Clegg.

⁴⁴Intentions, p. 160-164, 209.

position.

The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or what is only conventional, has no real claim on us.⁴⁵

They went so far as to rebel against habit, especially Arnold's dictum that 'conduct is three fourths of life'. For Pater, the man living a full life must 'burn always with a hard gem-like flame' and be 'forever curiously testing new opinions . . . Failure is to form habits.'⁴⁶ Wilde and Pater do not try to deny that men do live by custom: 'The security of society lies in custom and unconscious instinct.'⁴⁷ Arnold's doctrine is 'monstrous'⁴⁸ because this should not, and must not, be the case. Pater subscribed in practice to Arnold's rule, for he lived for his work; but as Yeats said, Wilde 'lived in the enjoyment of his own spontaneity'⁴⁹ and because of his own individuality believed in 'the great actual Individualism latent and potential in mankind generally.'⁵⁰ Ideally he longed for the 'fresh impulse of joy' which would come to the world if a man lived his life fully, giving 'form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream'.⁵¹

⁴⁵Pater, conclusion to Renaissance, p. 237.

⁴⁶Pater, Conclusion to Renaissance, p. 236 - 237.

⁴⁷Intentions, p. 188.

⁴⁸Ibid. p. 119.

⁴⁹W.B. Yeats, Autobiographies, 1955, p. 136.

⁵⁰Intentions, p. 283.

⁵¹Picture of Dorian Gray, p. 28.

This idea of fluidity is basic for Wilde and Pater. It causes them to reject any philosophy or system, for always they veer from the abstract and general to the concrete and particular.⁵² The individual, the moment, the unique experience are what matters, and these must be taken for what they are, not bent to any formal structure, to attempt to give meaning to a whole.⁵³ This is both the strength and the weakness of the 'aesthetic' school, for it could produce new intensity and observation but tended to search eventually for the bizarre rather than the ordinary, the unique, however perverse, rather than the normal. Pater idolises art, for 'art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.⁵⁴ Art, the supreme vehicle of Beauty, is thus extremely important, and, characteristically, Beauty becomes difficult of definition, and unfixed.

Beauty . . . is relative . . . to define Beauty
not in the most abstract but in the most concrete
terms possible . . . is the aim of the true
student of aesthetics.⁵⁵

Beauty must also be individual, concrete, relative.

Where Arnold had a central desire for metaphysical security Pater rejected this as rather unworthy. He was content to cultivate the relative spirit of modern thought, and most fundamental

⁵²This is so general in Wilde that Ojala says 'Wilde's principal mode of metaphor . . . namely the illustration of what is abstract and ideational by means of something concrete and physical.' II, 181.

⁵³Cf. Letters, p. 259.

⁵⁴Conclusion to Renaissance, p. 239.

⁵⁵Preface to Renaissance, p. vii.

to his own thinking is the Heraclitean flux. 'Modern thought is distinguished from ancient by its cultivation of the "relative" spirit in place of the "absolute"'. This idea is fundamental to Wilde's thought, and is the basic difficulty when we try to disentangle the threads of his critical ideas. In every subject, fluidity, relativity, movement, are the vital principles, and those which defy a systematisation of his thought.

Each of his critical pronouncements is clear and whole in itself, but difficulties, small and large, occur when they are considered together. This passage from The Critic as Artist seems central to the whole problem.

The true critic will, indeed, always be sincere in his devotion to the principle of beauty, but he will seek for beauty in every age and in each school, and will never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of thought, or stereotyped mode of looking at things. He will realise himself in many forms, and by a thousand different ways, and will ever be curious of new sensations and fresh points of view. Through constant change, and through constant change alone, he will find his true unity. He will not consent to be the slave of his own opinions. For what is mind but motion in the intellectual sphere? The essence of thought, as the essence of life, is growth.⁵⁶

This is Wilde's basic objection to philosophical system: where mind equals 'motion in the intellectual sphere', system, which implies something static rather than something dynamic, must be rejected. To Wilde, this idea of motion and growth was almost an obsession.

⁵⁶Intentions, p. 197. My italics.

'Through constant change . . . he will find his true unity'. There is then a kind of unity possible, a teleological process of mind. From this idea comes Wilde's contribution to the Romantic doctrine of the Masks which give more of truth than the supposed face behind: in fact a man, for Wilde, is almost faceless, just a series of Masks with some underlying unifying principle. He continues his essay:- 'You must not be frightened by words, Ernest. What people call insincerity is simply a method of multiplying our personalities.'

This doctrine explains his poses, his criticism in which Symons called him 'An artist in attitudes'.⁵⁷ Thus he can finish his essay The Truth of Masks by saying:-

Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay . . . The essay simply represents an artistic stand-point, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth: a Truth in art is that whose contradiction is also true.⁵⁸

If 'attitude is everything', the question of influence takes an even more complex turn. Each 'mask' Wilde wears may be his momentary amusement with one idea or outlook, culled from another writer - none can be pinned down as definite. It seems most useful then to consider in particular three of the most common and fundamental ideas that are to be found in Wilde's work, and to trace them in the work of others, not to find where he stole them, but to consider the stream of ideas and the subtle modifications he wrought in them.

⁵⁷A. Symons, A Study of Oscar Wilde, 1930.

⁵⁸Intentions, p. 269.

Wilde's most often repeated, and in some ways his most revolutionary ideas are all concerned with his fundamental idea of art. The first and in many ways most striking of these ideas is his attitude to life. Life is considered as itself an art, art being the most important concept in his mind. In the Critic as Artist we find it stated:-

Ernest: But what are the two supreme and highest arts?

Gilbert: Life and Literature, life and the perfect expression of life.⁵⁹

The consequences of this attitude are that artistic production cannot be regarded as the criterion of the artist:

This young dandy [Wainwright] sought to be somebody rather than to do something. He recognised that life itself is an art and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it.⁶⁰

This idea, incidentally, forms a new justification for the man who put his 'talent' into his work, his 'genius' into his life. Wilde sums it up in a characteristic aphorism - 'One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art.'⁶¹

The second point is also intimately connected with Wilde's basic concept of art, though superficially paradoxically opposed to it. It finds its fullest expression in Intentions, in the essay The Decay of Lying. In brief it is that art, especially in its

⁵⁹Intentions, p. 116.

⁶⁰Ibid. p. 67. See also pp. 280 - 292.

⁶¹Phrases and Philosophies for the use of the Young. Chameleon, December, 1894.

primary characteristics of form, style and beauty is superior not only to Nature, but to Life itself. Wilde discusses the improvements in life made by modern civilisation:

But these things merely produce health, they do not produce beauty. For this, Art is required, and the true disciples of the great artist are not his studio-imitators, but those who become like his works of art, be they plastic as in Greek days, or pictorial as in modern times: in a work Life is Art's best, Art's only pupil.⁶²

Life, he says, is 'terribly deficient in form'.⁶³

Scientifically speaking, the basis of life - the energy of life, as Aristotle would call it - is simply the desire for expression, and art is always presenting various forms through which this expression can be attained.⁶⁴

Form and style are the crux of the matter. Everyone knows Wilde's famous aphorism 'In matters of great importance, style, not sincerity'. But it is not just a clever epigram, it is in a profound sense a tenet of life. For Wilde, the basis of art is form: 'For the real artist is he who proceeds, not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion.'⁶⁵ Form is the only inspiration of art:

In every sphere of life Form is the beginning of things . . . Yes, Form is everything. It is the secret of life . . . Start with the worship of form, and there is no secret in art that will not be revealed to you.⁶⁶

⁶²Intentions, p. 34.

⁶³Ibid. p. 165.

⁶⁴Ibid. pp. 39 - 40.

⁶⁵Ibid. pp. 207 - 208.

⁶⁶See also Intentions, pp. 148 - 153.

It is the conclusion of the Decay of Lying that because of Form Life and Nature imitate Art.⁶⁷ Beauty is also emphasised as the supreme characteristic of art.⁶⁸

The last of the three major points is the one in which Wilde most clearly separates his ideas from the English tradition and allies himself with the French, the independence of art from Morals. Art, says Wilde, has no aim but its own perfection.⁶⁹

Art is out of the reach of morals, for her eyes are fixed upon things beautiful and immortal and ever-changing. So morals belong to lower and less intellectual spheres.⁷⁰

In a sense, in fact, art is actually immoral.

For emotion for the sake of emotion is the aim of art, and emotion for the sake of action is the aim of life, and of that practical organisation of life that we call society.⁷¹

Wilde's ideas on art and morality are most fully expressed in the Preface to Dorian Gray, in the newspaper controversy following the publication of that novel,⁷² and in his defence in cross-examination at the Trial of the Marquis of Queensberry and his own Trials.⁷³ Briefly, he always denied the validity of moral criticisms in art.

⁶⁷Intentions, pp. 54 - 56.

⁶⁸Ibid. p. 149.

⁶⁹Ibid. p. 259.

⁷⁰Ibid. p. 199.

⁷¹Ibid. p. 175.

⁷²See Letters, pp. 257 - 272.

⁷³See H. Montgomery Hyde, Trials of Oscar Wilde. See also Intentions, pp. 306 - 307.

'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all.'⁷⁴

The first point concerned the Art of Life, and the most important influence in this sphere is Baudelaire, whose conception of the idea of Dandyism is sympathetically described in L'Art Romantique. Although Beau Brummell was the inspiration for Barbey d'Aurevilly's work on Dandyism, Baudelaire's conception goes much deeper. The central aim of the Dandy is distinction: this is the final dignifying of all the 'l'art pur' notions of 'épatant les bourgeois', of the hatred of the commonplace. This leads in both Wilde and Baudelaire to a desire for the new, however dangerous, for the beautiful, however cruel.

Wilde wrote in 'De Profundis':-

People thought it dreadful of me to have entertained at dinner the evil things of life, and to have found pleasure in their company. But they, from the point of view through which I, as an artist in life, approached them, were delightfully suggestive and stimulating. It was like feasting with panthers. The danger was half the excitement . . . They were to me the brightest of gilded snakes. Their poison was part of their perfection . . . To entertain them was an astounding adventure. Dumas père, Cellini, Goya, Edgar Allan Poe, or Baudelaire, would have done just the same.⁷⁵

And in his book on Baudelaire, Gautier compares him to his friend

⁷⁴Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray and Miscellanies, p. 142.

⁷⁵Letters, p. 493.

Boissard in testing hashish, and says that Baudelaire too was 'amorous of new and rare sensations even when they were dangerous'. Finally, hatred of the banal caused Baudelaire to love even destructive beauty:-

Tu marches sur les morts, Beauté, dont tu te moques,⁷⁶
De tes bijoux l'Horreur n'est pas le moins charmant.

Dandyism is not just a question of exquisite elegance of dress:-
'For the perfect dandy these things are only a perfect symbol of the aristocratic superiority of his spirit.'⁷⁷ A dandy can never be an ordinary man:-

It is above all the ardent craving to create for oneself an originality contained within the exterior limits of the proprieties. It is a cult of oneself, which may survive the search for the happiness to be found in others - in woman for example; which may survive even all that is meant by the illusions. It is the pleasure to surprise others and the proud satisfaction never to be surprised oneself.

The possible influence of these words on Wilde's aesthetic phase of dress, and on his dandy's attitude later on is obvious. It is clear that Baudelaire is not subordinating Life completely to Art: he is treating Life as an Art, as important as any other art.

With Baudelaire, Dandyism becomes a kind of religion, the religion of Distinction, the execration of banality and vulgarity. Baudelaire says that Dandies 'are all representatives of what is

⁷⁶Les Fleurs du Mal, 'Hymne à la Beauté'.

⁷⁷P.G. Konody, The Painter of Victorian Life. A study of Constantin Guys, with an introduction and a translation of Baudelaire's Peintre de la Vie Moderne, 1930, pp. 126 - 137.

best in human pride, of the desire (which is but too rare today) to fight against and to destroy vulgarity'. This vehement, desperate fight against conformity and for individualism, which is almost identical in many ways with Wilde's, leads naturally and inevitably to a certain kind of political outlook. Baudelaire writes

Dandyism is the last splendour of heroism in decadence . . . Dandyism is a setting sun: like the star in its decline, it is superb, without heat and full of melancholy. But, alas: the rising tide of democracy which invades and levels everything, drowns day by day these last representatives of human pride.

Baudelaire's contention is that the artist is lost in democracy: even an unpleasant aristocracy is better. 'Chez un peuple sans aristocratie, le culte du beau ne peut que se corrompre, s'amoinrir, et disparaître.'⁷⁸

This could be a part of the Soul of Man under Socialism - Wilde shares his view as do Flaubert, the Goncourts and others. Flaubert and the brothers Goncourt felt a passion of disgust for the 'bourgeois'. This is their form of Baudelaire's dandyism. Flaubert regarded the impulse to intrude his personality as 'un tentation de bourgeois'.⁷⁹ He was both insistent and emphatic about this rule:-

The less you feel a thing, the fitter you are to express it as it is (as it always is,

⁷⁸E.A. Poe, Translation of life and works: Preface.

⁷⁹G. Flaubert, Correspondence, 4 vols., Paris, 1893, III, 221. See also E. and J. de Goncourt, Journal, May 6, 1861.

in itself, in its essence, freed of all ephemeral contingencies). But you must have the capacity to make yourself feel it.⁸⁰

In another mood, he is very indignant at the very idea of putting one's mere personal life into Art:

I refuse to consider Art a drainpipe for passion, a kind of chamberpot, a slightly more elegant substitute for gossip and confidences.⁸¹

Only artists could hold themselves above the vulgar man. Everything ignoble was held to stem from the bourgeois, and the bourgeois is the mass of mankind.

Really I profoundly value only two men, Rabelais and Byron, the only two who have written in a spirit of malice toward the human race and with the intention of laughing in its face. What a tremendous position a man occupies who places himself in such relation to the world!⁸²

This attitude is at the basis of the bulk of Wilde's epigrams and paradoxes, though we cannot measure the depth of his feeling.

One way in which Flaubert amused himself at the expense of the bourgeois was by building up a collection over twenty years, of all the crassest, most expected remarks that the bourgeois tend to utter in any given circumstances.⁸³ It is interesting to compare his method with Wilde's, who also noticed the tendency to a stock response.

⁸⁰The Selected Letters of Gustave Flaubert, edited by F. Steegmuller, 1954, p. 140. See also Correspondence, III, 331.

⁸¹Steegmuller, op. cit. p. 170. Cf. pp. 87, 186.

⁸²Steegmuller, p. 39.

⁸³A Dictionary of Platitudes. Being a compendium of conversational clichés, blind beliefs, fashionable misconceptions and fixed ideas, translated by E.J. Fluck, 1954.

While Flaubert brings them all together and displays their stupidity by copying them word for word, Wilde makes use of the fact that people expect a certain response to turn a large number of epigrams and paradoxes, on the lines of the well-known 'nothing succeeds like excess'. In another form Wilde pursues this idea in the Soul of Man under Socialism where he pursues the ideal of developing everyone's individuality to the greatest extent.

The second of Wilde's recurrent ideas that has a clear and traceable history is that art, with its special characteristics of Beauty and Form is superior to Nature and to Life itself. The worship of beauty is a trait to be found in all the French artists who believed in 'l'art pour l'art', and provides a special sympathy between Wilde and these writers.

In Gautier, for instance, he seemed specially attracted to the simple, all-consuming love of Beauty. 'I have spent my life in seeking beauty under all its protean forms, in order to depict it.'⁸⁴ Gautier's interest is in externals: in a man's clothes rather than his thoughts, in the word picture of his exterior. He is fascinated, like Wilde, by unusual words and names with lovely sounds. The Goncourts called him 'the Sultan of the epithet'.⁸⁵ Decoration is all important; his delight is in gold and purple, in velvet and marble. His poems are similar; in the very title Emaux et Camées we see his purpose. Wilde resembles him most in his early poems and his decorated Tales.

⁸⁴Preface to Mademoiselle de Maupin.

⁸⁵Journal, March 3, 1862.

Gautier's ideas are expressed with greatest conviction in Mademoiselle de Maupin and its famous Preface. This book, which Swinburne called 'the golden book of spirit and sense, the holy writ of beauty', and Baudelaire 'cette espèce d'hymne à la Beauté', expresses Gautier's love of physical and sensual images.^{85a} Like Wilde, Gautier was much influenced by the Greek ideal: 'Physical beauty, as perfect as the Greek type, is the only gift of which I have always been envious.' This admiration of Greek beauty became very widespread among writers. It is everywhere in Wilde's work, especially in The Critic as Artist. It became a convention, and at the same time was tied up with the defence of love among men, and the homosexuality that was often pretended and sometimes practised by English writers of the Nineties. Alfred Douglas wrote:- 'Je ne suis pas un monstre . . . je suis tout à fait sain et grec, et ce sont les autres, les gens qui se disent normales, qui sont des monstres et des dégénérés.'⁸⁶ Baudelaire wrote:- 'In Mademoiselle de Maupin, Greek beauty is staunchly defended in the full tide of Romantic exuberance.' With this love, in Gautier as in Wilde, comes a horror of death, especially the death of the body, and its decay into ugliness in sickness or age. But all artistic ideas find their profoundest qualifications in Baudelaire.

It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that Baudelaire's thought and art influenced all the art that followed his. His influence on Wilde is extensive, directly or indirectly exercised.

⁸⁶ Letter to Rachilde, quoted in catalogue by Charavay of Paris, Collection J.D. (1961).

^{85a} Mademoiselle de Maupin with its enthusiastic exploration of ambiguous sexuality also typifies the 'spiritual and moral perversity' which Symons described as characteristic of the Decadence.

Probably few things in literature did as subtly modify Wilde's outlook on life and the imaginative colouring of his work, as these "Flowers of Evil"⁸⁷ whose "poisoned honey" he delighted to feed upon.

Wilde was a very great admirer of Baudelaire's thought and art, and many of his maxims seem to stem from it.

Baudelaire started a new emphasis in modern literature with his admiration in Beauty of modernity as a quality.

The Beautiful consists of an eternal, unvariable element, the quantity of which it is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element which may be, as you please, in turn or simultaneously, the epoch, the fashion, morality or passion.⁸⁸

He concentrates immediately and almost entirely on the second element, as he believes its importance is generally overlooked. However hideous modern life in some respects may be, we must find our beauty here, in the present, and not in a sham copying of other times:

Woe to him who studies the antique for anything but pure art, logic and general method! As a result of plunging too deeply into it, he loses the memory of the present; he renounces the value and privileges furnished by actual occurrences; for nearly all our originality comes from the impression made by Time upon our sensations⁸⁹

Modernity is then vastly important. 'In a word, if anything modern is to be worthy to become antique, it is necessary to extract from it the mysterious beauty with which it is involuntarily endowed by

⁸⁷Bendz, p. 18.

⁸⁸Konody, p. 24. Cf. Wilde: A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated. "Dandyism is the assertion of the absolute modernity of Beauty." Letters, pp. 869 - 870.

⁸⁹Konody, p. 77.

human life.' If a subject lacked beauty it was necessary to transform it by poetic power, as we see in this line from the Fleurs du Mal:-

Tu m'as donné ta boue, et j'en ai fait de l'or.

This view did much to shape the ideas of the English aesthetics of the Nineties.⁹⁰

As a result of this theory Baudelaire found the quality of beauty to be in suggestiveness. The truth of the surface did not matter if it was beautiful. 'Masque ou décor, salut! J'adore ta beauté.'⁹¹ This is Baudelaire's adaptation of Gautier's love of mystery and romance. It resembles Wilde's. He says in Dorian Gray:- 'It is the uncertainty that charms one. A mist makes things wonderful.'

The worship of form and style has one supreme follower: 'If all high things have their martyrs, Gustave Flaubert might perhaps rank as the martyr of literary style.'⁹² Walter Pater's opinion of Flaubert is of course important as an indication of how great an influence Flaubert would have on Wilde. And indeed if we disregard the numerous appreciative references in Wilde's essays and letters to the work of Flaubert, we can conclude that had he never in fact read Flaubert he would have been influenced by him through Pater. Pater's essay on 'Style' is enormously sympathetic to Flaubert, and many of the ideas in it seem to stem from him. Pater is very

⁹⁰Letters, p. 869 - "A subject that is beautiful in itself gives no suggestion to the artist. It lacks imperfection."

⁹¹Fleurs du Mal, 'L'Amour du Mensonge': cf. Wilde's theme, The Truth of Masks.

⁹²Appreciations, p. 24.

impressed by Flaubert's devotion to art and style, and by his withdrawal from active normal life, so similar to Pater's own. He echoes Flaubert's misogyny, and quotes approvingly Flaubert's preference for the 'cultus' of the true beauty rather than for earthly love - 'a relative beauty'. Like Flaubert he would always undertake an immensely painstaking research for the uniquely suitable word.

From this we see that Flaubert's temperament was in some ways as alien to Wilde's as Pater's, although Wilde was very attracted to many of his ideas. The most important preoccupation with Flaubert was with technique and form.

A good prose sentence should be like a good line of poetry - unchangeable . . . no one has ever conceived a more perfect kind of prose than I.⁹³

He also attached enormous importance to form, making his watchword:- 'De la forme naît l'idée.' This idea Wilde adopted and developed in several places especially in The Critic as Artist: 'For the real artist is he who proceeds, not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion.'⁹⁴ He also points out that the form can dignify petty subject matter:-

out of the sordid and sentimental amours of the silly wife of a small country doctor in the squalid village of Yonville l'Abbaye, near Rouen, Gustave Flaubert was able to create a classic, and make a masterpiece of style . . . ⁹⁵

⁹³Quoted Steegmuller, introduction, p. 15.

⁹⁴Intentions, p. 207.

⁹⁵Ibid. p. 142.

Flaubert's words echo in much of Wilde's work:

What I love above all else is form, provided it be beautiful, and nothing beyond it. Women, whose hearts are too ardent and whose minds too exclusive, do not understand this religion of beauty, beauty without feeling. They always demand a cause, an end. I admire tinsel as much as gold: indeed, the poetry of tinsel is even greater, because it is sadder.⁹⁶

Renan was never an object of Wilde's idolatry, as were Gautier and Flaubert, but his influence was steady and important. Brian Nicholas⁹⁷ has traced in detail important parallels in political and religious thought between 'L'Avenir de la Science' and 'The Soul of Man under Socialism'. The echoes of the Vie de Jésus and Marc Aurèle are evident, and also those of The Poetry of the Celtic Races, especially in The Critic as Artist, although Wilde only nine times refers to Renan by name.

The attraction was intellectual only: Wilde admired Renan's assured cynicism, and accepted the conclusions of his scholarship without question, but temperamentally they were quite out of sympathy - Renan disparaged literature and lauded scientific truth. But Renan's love of Greece was akin to Wilde's: of Athens he said: 'There is one place where perfection exists; and only one. It is there.'⁹⁸ And with love of Greece went love of form, even in philosophy.

⁹⁶ Steegmuller, pp. 74 - 75.

⁹⁷ In the article on Wilde and Renan already mentioned.

⁹⁸ Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse, Paris, 1883.

'Form, in philosophy, is at least as important as content; the turn given to one's thought is the only possible demonstration of its truth.'⁹⁹

Love of beauty and love of form were not the only reasons for the theory that Art is superior to Life and Nature. Again we find the seeds of the theory in Baudelaire, and his detestation of nature. Like Wilde, Baudelaire was extraordinarily interested in the idea of sin. He believed in Original Sin, and the evil of the natural state. In L'Art Romantique (Éloge du Maquillage) he wrote:- 'Review, analyse all that is natural, you will find nothing that is not horrible. Everything fine and noble is the result of reason and calculation.' He carried this further and made it more individual in a letter to Toussenel:-

Speaking of original sin, I have often thought harmful, loathsome animals are perhaps nothing other than the vivification, embodiment, and dawning into life of man's evil thoughts. In this way the whole of nature participates in original sin.

Baudelaire believed that Nature is our basest element, and constantly at war with elevating instincts such as philosophy and religion.

Crime, he says, is natural to us, but:

Virtue is on the contrary artificial, supernatural, because gods and prophets were needed at all times and in all nations to teach it to animalised humanity, since man by himself would have been unable to discover it. Evil is produced without

⁹⁹Oeuvres Complètes, Paris, 1947-, III, 234 - 235.

effort, quite naturally, by fatality. The Good is always the product of an art. All that I have said of Nature as the counsellor of evil in matters of morality, and of reason as the true redeemer and reformer, may be transferred to the sphere of the Beautiful¹⁰⁰. . . . Fashion should therefore be considered as a symptom of the taste for the ideal . . . as a sublime deformation of Nature, or rather as a permanent successive attempt at reforming nature.

Instead of considering merely such things as paint and powder artificial, he includes all good things under this, because nature is wholly bad, and virtue itself is artificial. The effect of his theory can be seen throughout Wilde's writings: the clearest short examples are from his Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young¹⁰¹

The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is, no one has as yet discovered.

A really well made buttonhole is the only link between Art and Nature.

Baudelaire's ideas form a basis and an explanation for Wilde's reiterated denunciations of Nature and his assertion of the superiority of Art. In the same way Huysmans was very much influenced by Baudelaire, and his chief character Des Esseintes in à Rebours speaks just like Vivian in The Decay of Lying: 'Nature has had her day: the disgusting monotony of her landscapes and skyscapes has finally proved too much for refined and sensitive temperaments.'

¹⁰⁰Cf. Wilde's feeling that 'life is terribly deficient in form', Intentions, p. 165.

¹⁰¹First published in the Chameleon, December, 1894.

The last of the three points is the autonomy of art and the exclusion from criticism of moral questions. The French philosopher Victor Cousin usefully sums up the philosophical point of view most sympathetic to the adherents of 'L'Art pur':

Le seul objet de l'art est le beau. Pénétrons-nous bien de cette pensée que l'art est aussi à lui-même une sorte de religion. Dieu se manifeste à nous par l'idée du vrai, par l'idée du bien, par l'idée du beau.¹⁰²

This kind of philosophy could allow the development of 'l'art pur'. The artists were not philosophers; not even, apart from Renan, thinkers in the accepted sense. We contrast Gautier's statement of the independence of art with Cousin's:

Nous croyons à l'autonomie de l'art; L'art pour nous n'est pas le moyen, mais le but; tout artiste qui se propose autre chose que le beau n'est pas un artiste à nos yeux.¹⁰³

Although the writers of 'l'art pour l'art' were often attacked by philosophers,¹⁰⁴ they also found philosophical support in Jouffroy,¹⁰⁵ for Gautier's statement; 'En général, dès qu'une chose devient utile, elle cesse d'être belle.'¹⁰⁶

Because the initial statement of the aim of art is so important, we follow it with Baudelaire's view:

Poetry has no other aim than herself; can have no other; and no poetry will be so great, noble,

¹⁰²Du Vrai, du Beau, et du Bien, (1818, published 1836) p. 299.

¹⁰³L'Artiste, December, 14, 1856.

¹⁰⁴e.g. Lamennais, Esquisse d'une Philosophie, Paris, 1840, t. III. 133 - 134.

¹⁰⁵Cours d'Esthétique, 4th chapter, Paris, 1826.

¹⁰⁶Preface to Premières Poésies, 1832.

and truly worthy of the name of poetry as that written for the mere pleasure of writing a poem . . . I do not say that poetry cannot ennoble morals: that its final result may not be to raise men above the level of vulgar interests: that would be evidently absurd . . . Poetry, under pain of death or decay, cannot assimilate herself to science or ethics; she has not Truth for object she has only herself.¹⁰⁷

As in Wilde, this leads on to the question of morals in art, and these French writers are more or less unanimous. Cassagne has given two central maxims on the role of the artist, whose job is not to change life but to represent it as it is.¹⁰⁸

1. Le véritable artiste n'a pas à se preoccuper de la morale;
2. Au surplus l'art vrai n'est jamais immoral; - il est même naturellement moral, et d'une moralité supérieure.

'L'Art pur', then, must not judge or moralise: it must present the truth, the whole truth. Feydeau, in his life of Gautier,¹⁰⁹ says:- 'Proscrire de l'art la peinture du mal, équivaudrait à la négation de l'art même.' Moral teaching should be superfluous. When Flaubert was criticised for lack of a moralising character amidst the wickedness of Madame Bovary, Baudelaire broke out in L'Artiste, 18th October, 1857:

Absurdité, éternelle et incorrigible confusion des fonctions et des genres: une véritable oeuvre d'art n'a pas besoin de réquisitoire. La logique de l'oeuvre suffit à toutes les postulations de la morale, et c'est au lecteur à tirer les conclusions de la conclusion.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷L'Art Romantique, Etude sur Th. Gautier.

¹⁰⁸Cassagne p. 238.

¹⁰⁹E. Feydeau, Théophile Gautier, Paris, 1876, p. 99.

¹¹⁰My italics.

Moralising is excluded on the three counts of truth to life, aesthetic considerations and rationality. Flaubert reinforces this point:¹¹¹

Si le lecteur ne tire pas d'un livre la moralité qui doit s'y trouver, c'est que le lecteur est un imbécile, ou que le livre est faux au point de vue de l'exactitude. Car du moment qu'une chose est vraie, elle est bonne. Les livres obscènes ne sont même immoraux que parce qu'ils manquent de vérité. Ça ne se passe pas comme ça, dans la vie.

Barbey D'Aurevilly, in his preface to "Une Vieille Maîtresse", reinforces these points:-

La moralité de l'artiste est dans la force et la vérité de sa peinture . . . Si on conclut d'une oeuvre d'art vivante et vrai; si on conclut des choses mauvaises, tant pis pour les coupables raisonneurs. L'artiste n'est pour rien dans la conclusion.

Baudelaire corrects the original irresponsible ignoring of morals in Gautier's idea of 'l'art pur'. He protests against 'La puérile utopie de l'école de l'art pour l'art' - which at its extreme tried to exclude even passion from art. 'L'Art est désormais inseparable de la morale et de l'utilité.'¹¹² He also shows the dangers of the earlier extreme:

Le goût immodéré de la forme pousse à des désordres monstrueux et inconnus . . . les notions du juste et du vrai disparaissent. La passion frénétique de l'art est une chancre qui dévore le reste.¹¹³

¹¹¹Correspondence, IV, 230.

¹¹²Preface to 'Chansons de Pierre Dupont', 1852.

¹¹³De l'école païenne, 1851.

On this subject it only remains to emphasise once more Baudelaire's utter refusal of the idea that it is possible to moralise in art. He said of George Sand:- 'Elle a toujours été moraliste, aussi elle n'a jamais été artiste'.¹¹⁴

There is then, naturally, a certain history of ideas into which Wilde can be fitted. What is more important, however, than any question of copying or borrowing, is his selection and development of these ideas. Although it may be difficult of definition because it is not systematic, we will find in Wilde's work a dynamic unity, a unity of theme, stamped by his personality and essentially independent.

We have now covered the background of thought, the context in which Wilde's theories must be considered, but it is time to establish Wilde more firmly in the foreground of the picture. The next chapter, therefore, will be largely confined to Wilde's literary theory, considered as the work of an individual.

¹¹⁴Mon Coeur Mis à Nu (oeuvres posthumes et correspondance inédite).
Ed. Crépet, Paris, 1887, p. 101.

CHAPTER TWO

The Critical Theory

The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or what is only conventional, has no real claim on us.¹¹⁵

The scope and nature of Wilde's critical thought is the development of Pater's doctrine by a mind more mercurial, more dynamic, more creative than Pater's. We cannot expect a 'theory' of art or criticism. Wilde does not even insist, like Arnold, on a new way of approaching artistic questions; he insists that each single approach must be new and fresh. His critical thought is not a question of 'rules': we cannot even find a sharp definition of terms, for one of his methods of keeping his thought dynamic is constantly to change the signification of his terms. 'Truth' seems a constant problem, but truth is an idea which he treats in a hundred different ways, because the concept of truth is a universal one, and instead of a universal whose validity he denies, he presents a mass of different, more concrete instances.

His thought is the quintessence of Individualism. Much of his critical writing has had influence on later critics, but if we attempt to concentrate it, the result is less a set of ideas than an intellectual personality, a 'born antinomian', a brilliant and creative mind.

¹¹⁵The Renaissance, p. 237.

To attempt such a concentration, it will be best perhaps to examine briefly the arguments and conclusions of his most important critical essays, The Critic as Artist and The Decay of Lying: this should provide an outline at least of his critical theory. Both these essays are in dialogue form, a fact which, paradoxically, makes it easier to distinguish the threads of Wilde's thought which he is here putting forward as most valid. Wilde's many-faceted mind is always hard to follow in a straightforward essay, for he could not be, indeed would not have wished to be, single-minded on any subject.

He could always see the loopholes in his own argument, the opposite point of view, and could rarely resist giving it also. Thus the dialogue form helps us; when he is speaking with two voices instead of one, each is likely to be more coherent. At the same time, one is always finally dominant, and the other character, however lively at the beginning, is reduced to the position of a humble participant in a Socratic dialogue. Wilde shows his awareness of all the advantages of dialogue in The Critic as Artist, allowing poor Ernest to point out:-

By its means, too, he can invent an imaginary antagonist, and convert him when he chooses by some absurdly sophistical argument.¹¹⁶

Gilbert takes the dominant line in The Critic as Artist, as Vivian does in The Decay of Lying.

¹¹⁶Intentions, pp. 193 - 194.

The characteristic movement of thought in Wilde is one which constantly widens and deepens the scope of his subject matter. Thus, from the basic wish to redefine and rehabilitate the status of the critic, Wilde goes on to discuss Modernity as deriving from the Greek spirit, the false antithesis of the creative and critical faculties, Life as an art, and as an artistic failure, sin as an element in progress, the immorality of art, the futility of action and the importance of contemplation. These are only a few of the main themes of The Critic as Artist, and wound round them are countless minor ones, which the conversational form and the writer's skill blend smoothly together.

Characteristic, too, is the often-accomplished shift of context in the discussion of a particular question. An argument which holds good in the moral sphere is sure to be able to be transposed, for example, into an aesthetic setting. Baudelaire had the same method of making a point universal:-

All that I have said of Nature as the counsellor of evil in matters of morality, and of reason as the true redeemer and reformer, may be transferred to the sphere of the Beautiful.¹¹⁷

Wilde often uses this method without overtly pointing out the transposition, but also does it explicitly:-

While Metaphysics had no charm for me, and Morality absolutely none, there was nothing that either Plato or Christ had said that could not be transferred immediately into the sphere of Art, and there find its complete fulfilment.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷Konody, p. 150.

¹¹⁸Letters, p. 476. (D.P.)

The first subject Gilbert discussed is the delightfulness of egotism in literature,¹¹⁹ as a prelude, perhaps, to his later development of the theme of the importance of personality in the critic, where the record of the critic's own soul becomes 'the only civilised form of autobiography'.¹²⁰ But the argument really begins when Ernest asks:- 'What is the use of art-criticism?'.¹²¹ His attitude is a well-known one, stressing the superiority of the artist and the pettiness of the critic. Gilbert avoids answering the question directly, instead giving a three and a half page criticism of Browning as an indirect answer. Ernest is putting forward the well known views of Whistler, and his next assertion, that in the best days of art there were no critics, echoes Whistler's point:-

Let the work then be received in silence, as it was in the days to which penmen still point as an age when art was at its apogee.¹²²

For once Ernest is allowed his head, and he gives a spirited and enthusiastic account of the doctrine of Whistler's '10 o'clock' lecture. Gilbert again evades discussion, though showing that he disagrees, and has to be forced into stating his case; from this point on, all Ernest does is to admit Gilbert's points and ask leading questions. Gilbert's thesis is that the Greeks were the original possessors of the critical spirit, and exercised it on all subjects. He concentrates on their criticism of language,¹²³ and

¹¹⁹Intentions, p. 100.

¹²⁰Ibid. p. 144.

¹²¹Ibid. p. 105.

¹²²Gentle Art, p. 30.

¹²³Intentions, pp. 116 - 119.

then on their formal art criticism, and Aristotle's Treatise on Poetry.¹²⁴

The next question Ernest raises is that the creative faculty is higher than the critical. By a characteristic shift in the meaning of the word criticism, Gilbert shows that criticism is an integral part of creation.

Believe me, Ernest, there is no fine art without self-consciousness, and self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one.¹²⁵

Thus we come again to personality: Gilbert says that when a body of work is transformed into poetry, as in the case of Homer, it must be the work of one man - the individual. The critical faculty is the inventor of fresh forms. Ernest, trying to recover his original point, asks about criticism outside the creative process; Gilbert blames bad reviewing on the poor quality of the work to be reviewed. And he comes to his supreme paradox, that it is less difficult to do a thing than to talk about it.¹²⁶

This he defends strongly, mainly on the ground that it is language only that raises us above the animals, whereas action and emotion we have in common with them. Thus again he emphasises the importance of language. Action is blind and helpless, and limited by accident, and is 'always at variance with its aim'. An aim is 'worse than a delusion'.¹²⁷ He points to the awful consequences

¹²⁴Intentions, pp. 120 - 123.

¹²⁵Ibid. p. 126.

¹²⁶Ibid. p. 132.

¹²⁷Ibid. p. 133.

which can result and have resulted from good intentions, and good results from unworthy motives. He shows sin to be 'an essential element of progress',¹²⁸ which through curiosity 'increases the experience of the race'. He savagely attacks widely held views of virtue, regarding it as essentially a maiming factor in human life, something which mutilates us by self-sacrifice and self-denial.¹²⁹

Called back to literature, Gilbert compares the straightforward ease with which the participants acted in the Trojan epic to the greatness of those who made them immortal, and passes to a eulogy of the Iliad, and hence to another assertion that literature is the highest art. It is so because it is the only one which can capture and record movement,¹³⁰ and thus it mirrors life more perfectly than the other arts, such as sculpture and painting, which can immortalise a moment only. Movement, considered here in a limited field, is to become a focal point in Gilbert's aesthetic manifesto.

His next point is the supreme elevation of the critic: just as the artist is superior to the man who acts, the critic is superior even to the artist. He is not only creative, but also more independent; criticism is not required in any sense to imitate

¹²⁸Intentions, p. 134.

¹²⁹Ibid. p. 135.

¹³⁰Ibid. cf. p. 116.

the work of art which forms its subject matter or starting point.

'Treatment is the test.'¹³¹ Criticism is creative because it puts the material into a new form:

Nay, more, I would say that the highest Criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing, and, as the Greeks would put it, in itself, and to itself, an end.¹³²

The highest criticism - and it is well here to note the gulf that separates Gilbert's use of the term and Ernest's original usage - the highest criticism is 'the record of one's own soul'.¹³³

Gilbert then discusses Arnold's assertion that 'the proper aim of criticism is to see the object as in itself if really is.' He counters it by saying that criticism's most perfect form is subjective, and deals with art 'not as expressive but as impressive purely'.¹³⁴ This view, which Wilde shares with Pater, is often explicit or implicit in Wilde's work. Criticism must be subjective, in fact, because there can be no treatment of the work as it is - by itself, it does not exist. It exists for the reader or spectator by virtue of the effect it has on him as an individual:

for the meaning of any beautiful thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it. Nay, it is rather the beholder who lends to the

¹³¹Intentions, p. 143.

¹³²Ibid. p. 143.

¹³³Ibid. p. 144.

¹³⁴Ibid. p. 145.

beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvellous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age . . . 135

Criticism is the record of this individual impression on a very sensitive temperament. Here again, temperament is of course of the first importance. When he gives his examples of such criticism, Gilbert reveals the narrow field he regards as the highest criticism - Ruskin on Turner, Pater on the Mona Lisa - in fact, the specialised 'art literature' of the later nineteenth century.

He continues on this theme of art as impressive, which leads him to say that Beauty is 'the symbol of symbols' - it 'reveals everything because it expresses nothing'.¹³⁶ Art must not be obvious or too easily understood, and music has perfection because it 'can never reveal its ultimate secret'.¹³⁷ This is why, despite all he has said about the superiority of literature because it can express so much,¹³⁸ he now goes on to show the value of limitations in art:

It is through its very incompleteness that Art becomes complete in beauty, and so addresses itself, not to the faculty of recognition nor to the faculty of reason, but to the aesthetic sense alone . . . 139

Part I was subtitled:- 'With some remarks upon the importance of doing nothing', and as we have seen, one of its main themes was

¹³⁵Intentions, p. 148; cf. p. 164.

¹³⁶Ibid. p. 149.

¹³⁷Ibid. p. 151.

¹³⁸Ibid. See again p. 140.

¹³⁹Ibid. p. 153.



that art is superior to life because artistic creation is free, while action is blind and limited. In Part II, 'With some remarks upon the importance of discussing everything', this remains a major theme, and is enlarged and developed.

The opening is concerned with explaining to what extent the critic can be an interpreter. He does not interpret in order to explain, but rather to deepen the mystery and enhance the majesty of art. He must possess a great deal of scholarly knowledge.¹⁴⁰ But it is, strangely enough, only by intensifying his own personality that he can fully interpret art. This idea is closely related to the concept of art existing as subjective impression discussed above. The examples Gilbert chooses are convincing and unusual. The actor and the musician, he says, are critics and interpreters, and by use of their own personalities they reveal all sorts of new qualities in the play or composition. In the created work, in fact, there may be many meanings unintended by the artist, but of equal validity with his intentions, because the beholder's mind is now of primary importance. This is creative criticism. It also brings us again to his theme that a finished work is no longer dependent on its creator. Hamlet is so great precisely because it is capable of such varied interpretations - 'there are as many Hamlets as there are melancholies'.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Intentions, p. 160.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. p. 164.

The critic has the finest and most receptive mind; it is his task to show a work of art 'in some new relation to our age'. For a work of art is not static but living, and will have new meanings for different times. Gilbert forecasts a time when the 'elect' spirits (the critics) will be interested only in art. This is because life is deficient in Form.¹⁴² Although in the Decay of Lying, Nature is criticised for its monotonous repetition even of beautiful things,¹⁴³ here life is considered an artistic failure because 'one can never repeat exactly the same emotion': in art, for example in the work of Dante, we can re-read a passage, sure in advance of the emotion we will feel because we know it and have experienced it before.¹⁴⁴ Gilbert passes on to consider Baudelaire, and the way in which his poems can affect the reader, opening up for him whole worlds of terror and evil. We can safely experience every passion by means of art, and life is narrow and confined in comparison.¹⁴⁵ These emotions are in essence sterile and cannot hurt us; their action is cathartic, and in art we can realise our own perfection and also shield ourselves from life. For this reason Gilbert declares that art is basically immoral; 'For emotion for the sake of emotion is the aim of art, and emotion for the sake of action is the aim of life.'¹⁴⁶ Art is anti-social.

¹⁴²Intentions, p. 164.

¹⁴³Ibid. p. 43.

¹⁴⁴Ibid. p. 166.

¹⁴⁵Ibid. p. 173.

¹⁴⁶Ibid. p. 175.

Now we come to what is perhaps the most philosophical part of the work, although Gilbert dismisses philosophy as 'the chill mathematics of thought'.¹⁴⁷ Gilbert claims that contemplation is the proper-occupation of man. This is a further and unexpected step; after his assertion that to 'talk about a thing' (i.e. to be a creator) 'is more difficult than to do it',¹⁴⁸ he goes on to say that 'to do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world'.¹⁴⁹ This is a new step, and not merely a development of his former thought. It has been considered as Wilde's apologia for his own laziness as a writer, and certainly it is a very convenient doctrine in this way, but it seems likely to be the result of his reading of Chuang-Tzu, the Chinese philosopher, whose work, lately translated into English, he had reviewed with great enthusiasm in The Speaker, in February, 1890.¹⁵⁰ This contemplation is of a particular kind; unlike the commoner instances of the West, it is neither philosophical nor intellectual, (we know too much about the mystery of life to accept speculation in place of life),¹⁵¹ nor is it mystical, (religion is out of date; we know too much, and can no longer believe). The contemplation of Nature is highly superior, and that of art supreme.

He introduces a favourite subject, 'the collective life of the

¹⁴⁷Intentions, p. 177.

¹⁴⁸Ibid. p. 132.

¹⁴⁹Ibid. p. 176.

¹⁵⁰Reviews, p. 528.

¹⁵¹Intentions, p. 177.

race', which this form of contemplation enables us to realise, and uses the principle of Heredity as the essential warrant for contemplation. Darwin had a great influence on Wilde, and his evolutionary theories adapted to the cause of art are constantly in evidence:

The nineteenth century is a turning point in history simply on account of the work of two men, Darwin and Renan, the one the critic of the Book of Nature, the other the critic of the books of God.¹⁵²

The idea of heredity, Gilbert says, has finally shown that we have no freedom at all in the realm of physical experience, but in the 'subjective sphere' it opens up to us the accumulated thought experience of the race, and all emotions. Imagination, he asserts, which enables us to enter into literature in the way he described,¹⁵³ is 'simply concentrated race-experience'. The critical spirit lies in the man who lives this most intensely, and can give us the aim not of doing, but of being, and of becoming. We then become as the gods. He sounds a note much extended in The Soul of Man Under Socialism, when he derides those who act, particularly those who try to do good, instead of trying to know. Further, as he attacks altruism in that essay, here he praises egotism; 'it takes a thoroughly selfish age, like our own, to deify self-sacrifice.'¹⁵⁴ Egotism is necessary because 'the development of the race depends on the development of the individual', and self-culture must be the ideal.

¹⁵²Intentions, p. 220.

¹⁵³Ibid. pp. 166 - 173.

¹⁵⁴Ibid. p. 185.

Typically, he passes his argument from the 'ethical sphere',¹⁵⁵ to the intellectual sphere. The philanthropist prevents the solution of social problems, because his emotional sympathy prevents knowledge; the equivalent, says Gilbert, in the intellectual sphere is the teacher - the man who is so busy educating others that 'he has never had any time to educate himself.'¹⁵⁶ The main point at issue is the enormous importance Gilbert attaches to knowledge and the value of self-culture. The idea that the race develops because of the self-culture of an élite is particularly stressed by Renan, and Wilde's thought is influenced by L'Avenir de la Science.

Gilbert goes on to prove now that 'all thought is, in its essence, dangerous'.¹⁵⁷ The reason he gives is that society depends for its continued existence on conformity and unconscious instinct - intelligence endangers the basis of society.

Ernest's next tentative proposition is that the greatest work is never the critical, because criticism is in its essence subjective, and the greatest literature is objective. But Gilbert will not allow that the opposition of subjective and objective is more than one of form. All creation is subjective.¹⁵⁸ He takes drama, perhaps the most objective form, as example, and claims that every character is part of the creator, for we cannot pass out of ourselves.

¹⁵⁵Intentions, p. 187.

¹⁵⁶Ibid. p. 187.

¹⁵⁷Ibid. p. 188.

¹⁵⁸Ibid. p. 189.

Characters are formed from elements of the creator's nature. Shakespeare was fulfilled in his creation as he could never have been in action. But we may note in passing that if we follow Gilbert's argument to its logical conclusion, Shakespeare should not have created, but should have passed his time in contemplation alone. Gilbert claims that the most objective form reveals most of the creator:

Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth.¹⁵⁹

This remark is of interest in considering Wilde's dialogues, and his reason for using the form.

Ernest seizes on the idea that objective forms reveal most, and suggests that the critic, limited to subjective forms, cannot express himself so fully, but Gilbert denies that any form is barred to the critic, even dialogue and drama. The virtues of the dialogue form are enlarged upon, and its long record of successful use by great men. In dialogue, the author can give 'form to every fancy, reality to every mood',¹⁶⁰ He can exhibit his subject from more than one point of view. He emphasises that:-

each mode of criticism is, in its highest development, simply a mood, and that we are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹Intentions, p. 191.

¹⁶⁰Ibid. p. 193 (My italics).

¹⁶¹Ibid. p. 191.

Now Ernest has a chance to describe the necessary qualities of the true critic, and the qualities he suggests, which closely follow Arnold's ideas, are rejected in turn. His first suggestion, that the critic should be fair, is ridiculed by Gilbert; because the basis of appreciation is an impression on the individual temperament, the critic cannot be unbiassed:

Art is a passion, and, in matters of art,
Thought is inevitably coloured by emotion,
and so is fluid rather than fixed, and,
depending upon fine moods and exquisite
moments, cannot be narrowed into the rigidity
of a scientific formula or a theological dogma.¹⁶²

The critic cannot be fair; he must surrender himself completely to the work he is considering at any one time in order to gain its secret.

Ernest secondly presumes that the critic must be rational, and from the way his last idea was dismissed, we can anticipate that this too will be rejected. As Gilbert sees the sphere of morals as distinct from and inferior to the sphere of art, so he rejects the sphere of reason in art also:

If one loves Art at all, one must love it beyond
all other things in the world, and against such
love, the reason, if one listened to it, would cry
out. There is nothing sane about the worship of
beauty. It is too splendid to be sane. Those
of whose lives it forms the dominant note will
always seem to the world to be pure visionaries.¹⁶³

¹⁶²Intentions, p. 195.

¹⁶³Ibid. pp. 196-197.

That this was Wilde's personal belief is clear throughout his life and art, and never more clear than when he failed his ideal. In De Profundis he writes:

One half-hour with Art was always more to me than a cycle with you. Nothing really at any period of my life was ever of the smallest importance to me compared with Art.¹⁶⁴

Then the luckless Ernest makes his third point, that the critic must be sincere. This is rejected on fundamental grounds; it implies a static attitude on the part of the critic, and in reply Gilbert emphasises the immense importance of fluidity and change in a key passage already examined in Chapter One.¹⁶⁵ Also, sincerity and fairness both have a moral flavour, and as usual Wilde is adamant in separating the moral and aesthetic 'spheres'. Morals are for the lower spheres, those of blind action: science escapes, because 'her eyes are fixed upon eternal truths',¹⁶⁶ and art because 'her eyes are fixed upon things beautiful and immortal and unchanging'.¹⁶⁷

Gilbert proceeds to give his own description of the true critic, without any interruptions. Of course, temperament is the 'primary requisite',¹⁶⁸ and he discusses how the beauty sense in man can be purified by environment. He recalls Plato's ideal of education, by which beautiful surroundings develop a sense of beauty which gives a man an instinctive love of good, and fine taste. Eventually, this taste becomes 'critical and self-conscious'.¹⁶⁹ Gilbert goes

¹⁶⁴Letters, p. 427.

¹⁶⁵Pp. 23 - 25.

¹⁶⁶Intentions, p. 199 - but see also his definition of truth, p. 194.

¹⁶⁷Ibid. p. 199.

¹⁶⁸Ibid. p. 200.

¹⁶⁹Ibid. p. 201.

on to consider the 'Renaissance of the Decorative Arts' taking place in England, of which Wilde was one of the prophets, and praises the achievements of the movement. Decorative arts are those which 'touch us', not 'teach us'. In his eulogy of these arts, which depend on colour, harmony, and repetition of pattern, and exclude both the noisy individuality of the artist and the inspiration of imitating Nature, Wilde touches again on the theme of his earlier essay, The Decay of Lying, where Art is said not to imitate Nature, but in the end Nature imitates Art.

Form is the vital thing, and the beginning of art. 'For the real artist is he who proceeds, not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion.'¹⁷⁰ Gilbert goes as far as to say that real passions cannot be transformed into art; life, recalling again The Decay of Lying, is not fit material for art:- 'All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling'.¹⁷¹ Form is the mainspring of 'every sphere of life'. It creates 'not merely the critical temperament, but also the aesthetic instinct'.¹⁷²

The critic's influence will be the very fact of his existence - he will realise the culture of the century. Gilbert says we must not ask of him anything but 'the perfecting of himself'.¹⁷³ He can exercise influence, of a general kind, by awakening the responses of his age. He will not be preoccupied with the writers of his own

¹⁷⁰Intentions, p. 207.

¹⁷¹Ibid. p. 207.

¹⁷²Ibid. p. 208.

¹⁷³Ibid. p. 209.

time, nor will he try to influence them.

Gilbert challenges Ernest's suggestion that the artist is the best judge of art, refuting Whistler's doctrine. Art appeals to the artistic temperament, and a great artist needs a 'concentration of vision',¹⁷⁴ which blinds him to the merits of other artists' work. Paradoxically, 'it is exactly because a man cannot do a thing that he is the proper judge of it' - 'for creation limits, while contemplation widens, the vision'.¹⁷⁵ Though as Ernest points out, each art has its own technique, it is personality that makes it live: in this sense technique can neither be learnt nor taught. Only the aesthetic critic can appreciate all modes. (Wilde here forgets that a few pages before only the auctioneer could do this.)¹⁷⁶

The future belongs to criticism; the subject-matter of creation, presumably life and nature, is almost exhausted, but the subject-matter of art increases daily. 'There are always new attitudes for the mind, and new points of view.'¹⁷⁷ Gilbert passes to a eulogy of criticism, and the claims he makes for it show the width and scope of meaning he is now attaching to it. He quotes Arnold's dictum that criticism creates the intellectual atmosphere of the age. It develops the mind. By concentration, it makes culture possible,

¹⁷⁴Intentions, p. 211.

¹⁷⁵Ibid. p. 212.

¹⁷⁶Ibid. p. 196.

¹⁷⁷Ibid. p. 215.

by distilling 'the cumbersome mass of creative work' into 'a finer essence',¹⁷⁸ criticism is our guide in the 'labyrinth' of creative work. And where there are no records, criticism can recreate the past from tiny fragments of language and art. (Here criticism is almost identical with Philology and Archaeology.)^{178a} Philological criticism can give us 'the exact science of the mind in the process of becoming',¹⁷⁹ a process which exerts a compelling influence on Wilde, and is one of his major preoccupations. It also makes us cosmopolitan, cutting across barriers of race or creed as nothing else can do. Goethe is a supreme example of this cosmopolitan attitude. Criticism annihilates prejudice by insisting on 'the unity of the human mind in the variety of its forms'.¹⁸⁰

Finally, and most important, criticism creates the serene philosophic temper that loves truth for its own sake, (but has not Gilbert by this time destroyed the idea of truth?) by refusing to adopt any position or system as final. He praises Arnold's idea of 'sweet reasonableness',¹⁸¹ and chooses Darwin as one of its few exemplars. Free play of the mind is unknown to us, and of supreme importance. Like the mystic, the artistic critic is always an antinomian, for he transcends ethics, which, he repeats, belong to a lower sphere than aesthetics.

¹⁷⁸Intentions, p. 216.

¹⁷⁹Ibid. p. 217.

¹⁸⁰Ibid. p. 219.

¹⁸¹Ibid. p. 220.

^{178a}This idea in an extended form provides the basis of The Truth of Masks, an essay atypical in general of Wilde's thought.

Ernest sums up the points Gilbert has made¹⁸² in a way which pointedly illustrates one of Wilde's main methods of presentation. He makes people take notice by expressing a thought, even if not particularly controversial, in startling terms, and as extreme positions.

Before discussing The Decay of Lying it is important to recall Wilde's maxim:¹⁸³ 'Art is the only serious thing in the world. And the artist is the only person who is never serious.' Far more than in the Critic as Artist, The Decay of Lying is a pose, an affectation. 'The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint.'¹⁸⁴ It is less easy to decide where Wilde is serious, or rather how serious he is at any one point. The arguments are overstressed, the characters over-dandified, the self mockery of the author constantly impedes interpretation. Like the Critic as Artist, this work is in dialogue form, but is more elaborate, and approximates slightly more to the play form, in that it has the vestiges of a plot and more scene-setting. The 'plot' concerns a paper that Vivian has written for the 'Retrospective Review': this is brought up in discussion, read in instalments, and criticised by Cyril, who is, at first at least, a little more lively and witty than Ernest in the other work. This dialogue illustrates Wilde's theory of criticism¹⁸⁵ having a wide choice of forms. This is even clearer

¹⁸²Intentions, p. 223.

¹⁸³Letters, p. 869.

¹⁸⁴Cf. Intentions, p. 269.

¹⁸⁵Ibid. p. 193.

in The Portrait of Mr. W.H., which is in the form of a fascinating short story, which incorporates not only a considerable body of minute and perceptive scholarship on the subject of Shakespeare's sonnets, but also a favourite theme, that if a man persuades another to his own ideas, he loses faith in them himself.

The main subject of The Decay of Lying is the supremacy of art, its independence of models, its superiority to Nature and Life. It starts with Cyril admiring nature, and Vivian proudly boasting that he does not. Art, he says, shows us the crudity of Nature, and her lack of design. There is no variety in Nature - this exists only in the imagination of man. Nature is uncomfortable, and it is man's artifacts that suit him and let him express his personality. Nature hates Mind: thinking is unnatural and unhealthy - here is a first statement of Gilbert's view in The Critic as Artist that all thought is dangerous.

Vivian rejects consistency, as Wilde always does; his artistic motto is 'Whim'. The subject of his article is 'The Decay of Lying: A Protest' - another example of the startling means of expression being used to intrigue the reader. We will gradually discover what he means by 'lying', just as what Gilbert means by 'criticism' becomes apparent in The Critic as Artist. He proceeds to a eulogy of the liar,

with his frank, fearless statements, his
superb irresponsibility, his healthy, natural
disdain of proof of any kind! 186

186 Intentions, p. 6.

The keynote of this argument, not here made explicit, is Wilde's determined separation of facts and truth. Truth is a concept, as we have seen, which bears different interpretations at different points in his thought, but it is always something infinitely superior to mere fact; it is an imaginative reality. Wilde's vehement and continued opposition to Journalism¹⁸⁷ is his opposition to facts, which are in their essence quite unimportant, being elevated to a ludicrous dignity, while truth, in the work of the artist, is proscribed and rejected.

Vivian introduces his article with a reference to its proposed audience, the 'Tired Hedonists': Wilde here makes splendid mockery of the ideas he himself advocated. The Tired Hedonists are young, disillusioned and very much in favour of artifice as opposed to Nature. The paper begins with a lament on the decay of lying, and the nineteenth century's appalling dependence on facts in all spheres. Lying here clearly means imagination, romantic and unshackled. Lying is an art, characterised by 'rich rhythmic utterance',¹⁸⁸ and perfection produced by practice. It starts with 'a natural gift for exaggeration', which should be, but is not encouraged, but the youth either 'falls into careless habits of accuracy', or frequents the society of older people, always a bad thing in Wilde's mind. These things are fatal to the imagination,

¹⁸⁷Cf. for example Intentions, pp. 312 - 314.

¹⁸⁸Intentions, p. 9.

and indeed the whole age is subject to 'our monstrous worship of facts'.¹⁸⁹ Now follows a review of contemporary novelists, which shows how all have fallen victim to some degree to 'fact-worship'. Here we see the germ of one idea prominent in The Critic as Artist. 'The only real people are the people who never existed',¹⁹⁰ is obviously the precursor of:-

Whatever actually occurs is spoiled for art.
All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling.
To be natural is to be obvious, and to be
obvious is to be inartistic.¹⁹¹

Another point Vivian makes is a central theme not in Wilde's work only, but in much of the literature of the Nineties. It may have its rise to some extent in the cult of Dandyism promulgated especially by Baudelaire.¹⁹²

In point of fact what is interesting about people in good society . . . is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask. It is a humiliating confession, but we are all of us made out of the same stuff . . . Where we differ from each other is purely in accidentals: in dress, manner, tone of voice, religious opinions, personal appearance, tricks of habit and the like. The more one analyses people, the more all reasons for analysis disappear. Sooner or later one comes to that dreadful universal thing called human nature! ¹⁹³

Like Baudelaire, Wilde therefore tends to occupy himself with surfaces, and masks.

¹⁸⁹Intentions, p. 10.

¹⁹⁰Ibid. p. 14.

¹⁹¹Ibid. p. 207.

¹⁹²Chapter One, pp. 28 - 30.

¹⁹³Intentions, p. 15.

The discussion continues with Cyril's rather backhanded defence of some fashionable novels and a query about Balzac and Meredith. This allows Vivian to show by his description of these two how neither is a realist in the accepted sense. Meredith has 'made himself a romanticist by deliberate choice',¹⁹⁴ and Balzac in comparison with Zola, illustrates the difference between 'unimaginative realism and imaginative reality'. Balzac's characters have such life that they make our own friends appear as shadows. Vivian's only criticism of Balzac is of his modernity of form; art should not be interested in what the public cares about. Vivian quotes Gautier's famous saying, 'The only beautiful things are the things that do not concern us.'¹⁹⁵ Anything which does concern us is outside the proper sphere of art. This is an extreme view, and in complete contrast to the views Wilde expressed in his American lectures, when he was lauding Morris and Ruskin and the 'dignity of labour'. Characteristically, he derides the introduction of propaganda in the works of Charles Reade and Dickens, an attitude in Wilde which remained constant until it became a matter of considerable struggle when he was writing the Ballad of Reading Gaol, as can be seen by the letters of the time.

We come to a most important subject when Cyril raises the question of the return to Life and Nature, often recommended as a

¹⁹⁴Intentions, p. 17.

¹⁹⁵Ibid. p. 19.

panacea for art. Vivian has covered this idea in his paper: as might be expected, he rejects it, but his reasons are startlingly put:-

Nature is always behind the age. And as for
Life, she is the solvent that breaks up Art,
the enemy that lays waste her house.¹⁹⁶

If by Nature we mean natural simple instinct without culture, this always produces work that is old-fashioned. If we mean external Nature, it is man alone who brings meaning to her.

The relationship of Life and Art is described as a Marxian progression. First, art is purely abstract decoration: Life becomes fascinated, and art uses life as part of her raw material, and recreates it: finally, 'Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness.'¹⁹⁷ This is true decadence in art, and takes the form of unimaginative realism. Vivian uses the case of English drama to illustrate his thesis: medieval drama was 'abstract, decorative and mythological';¹⁹⁸ Elizabethan and Shakespearean drama belong to the second period when Art recreates Life and rewrites history. But even in Shakespeare, Life was beginning to take the upper hand. The third stage includes the modern English melodrama which is 'wearisome',¹⁹⁹ because taken directly from life and not transformed. He finds a similar case in the decorative arts, and the struggle between conventional,

¹⁹⁶Intentions, p. 21.

¹⁹⁷Ibid. p. 22.

¹⁹⁸Ibid. p. 23.

¹⁹⁹Ibid. p. 25.

non-representational Oriental art and the western imitative instinct.

Vivian's article does forecast a change for the better: society will eventually return to the fascinating liar through sheer boredom!

For the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure. He is the very basis of civilised society.²⁰⁰

Art will welcome the return of the liar, for art knows:

that he alone is in possession of the great secret of all her manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style.²⁰¹

Here is yet another definition of Truth. Wilde's pronouncements on Truth are not so much contradictory but form a many-faceted whole.

Art, Vivian's paper continues, finds her own perfection within herself. She cannot be judged by any external standard. She provides 'archetypes of which things that have existence are but unfinished copies'.²⁰² Vivian's description of the powers and beauty of art draws a somewhat self-mocking reply from Wilde in the voice of Cyril:-

'I like that. I can see it. Is that the end?'

But before proceeding to the end, Cyril has a question. Does Life really imitate Art? Yes, says Vivian. He gives examples of England producing Pre-Raphaelite ladies after Rossetti's paintings. The Greeks, he claims, knew that Life gains form as well as spirituality from art, and were against realism because it makes people ugly.

²⁰⁰Intentions, p. 29.

²⁰¹Ibid. p. 30.

²⁰²Ibid. p. 32.

Art makes them beautiful. His next examples are from literature, the boy criminals who imitate Dick Turpin, melancholy, which was invented by Hamlet, and four examples which he claims are true stories of people re-living the events of novels, accidentally or self-consciously. He then repeats his principle that Life imitates Art more than Art Life. Art presents forms through which Life can express itself.²⁰³

Cyril asks if Nature also imitates Art, and Vivian is prepared to prove anything.²⁰⁴ Again, this earlier dialogue is throughout written in a more frivolous way than The Critic as Artist, whose light-hearted style rarely masks Wilde's genuine intellectual exploration. Examples here are the fogs which Nature has produced, following the impressionists. Nature is nothing without man the observer, just as in The Critic as Artist even Art is nothing without the receptive temperament. Art teaches us to see a thing's beauty, not just to look at it. Even when Nature learns an effect from Art, she tends to spoil it by tedious repetition. Sunsets, for example, are old-fashioned; they went out with Turner, but Nature refuses to give them up. The flippancy is clear, and characteristic.

Cyril now says Art expresses the temper of its age, and Vivian retorts with the principle of his new aesthetics, 'Art never expresses anything but itself';²⁰⁵

²⁰³Intentions, pp. 40 - 41.

²⁰⁴Ibid. p. 41.

²⁰⁵Ibid. p. 44. Cf. also pp. 148 - 153.

The highest art rejects the burden of the human spirit, and gains more from a new medium or a fresh material than she does from any enthusiasm for art, or from any lofty passion, or from any great awakening of the human consciousness.²⁰⁶

Realistic art does not truly reflect its age, as Breughel's drunken peasants do not reflect the soul of Holland. Rather, the more abstract the art, the more it shows 'the temper of its age'.

If we wish to understand a nation by means of its art, let us look at its architecture or its music.²⁰⁷

Cyril agrees that spirit is revealed in abstract, ideal arts, but presses that we must consult imitative arts for the 'visible aspect of an age'. Vivian rejects even this. Imitative arts show us the styles of artists, not the age, he says, pointing to Medieval and Japanese painting. Do we really think they are realistic? 'No great artist ever sees things as they really are.'²⁰⁸ These styles colour our ideas of the periods:

The fact is, that we look back on the ages entirely through the medium of art, and art, very fortunately, has never once told us the truth.²⁰⁹

Even portraits are memorable for what they contain of the artist, not the sitter, and the more the artist's style triumphs the more we believe in the reality of his portraiture: the artist triumphs over life:

It is style that makes us believe in a thing - nothing but style.²¹⁰

²⁰⁶Intentions, p. 45.

²⁰⁷Ibid. p. 46.

²⁰⁸Ibid. p. 47.

²⁰⁹Ibid. p. 49.

²¹⁰Ibid. p. 50. Cf. Dorian Gray, p. 8.

Vivian laments that even dreams nowadays are sordid and tedious, neatly recalling us to his central theme. Even in the Church, the miraculous is neglected and scepticism holds sway. This is stupid, for 'Man can believe the impossible, but man can never believe the improbable.'²¹¹ The article concludes by reviewing ways of reviving lying, for personal gain, for education, for a monthly salary (journalism again). But:

The only form of lying that is absolutely beyond reproach is lying for its own sake, and the highest development of this is, as we have already pointed out, lying in Art.²¹²

We must love Beauty more than Truth, (but here Wilde has reverted to a lesser idea of Truth than the one Vivian exalted over facts at the start of the essay.).

Finally, Vivian sums up the three main doctrines of his new aesthetics. First, Art is independent, and does not reproduce its age. Second, bad art comes from idealising life and nature, which are only useful as part of art's raw material. Realism is a failure, and modernity an error. Beautiful things are so only if they do not concern us. Thirdly, Life imitates Art more than Art Life. Art provides forms for Life to realise its energy. Nature also imitates Art - we can only see effects in her that we have already seen in Art. Finally, 'Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art.'²¹³

²¹¹Intentions, p. 51.

²¹²Ibid. p. 53.

²¹³Ibid. p. 56.

When we have briefly reviewed the arguments of Wilde's most elaborate critical writings, we should find ourselves in a position to sum up his 'critical theory'. There is a curious difficulty about it, however, and it is important to discover why this difficulty exists. A primary reason is that a reasoned and water-tight theory will have some recourse to the rules of logic, if not formally, at least in its coherence and lack of self-contradiction. But even in Wilde's dialogues, where it is usually safe to identify Wilde's conclusions with those of the more loquacious character, it is not possible to produce a reasoned argument on one subject or line of thought as a precis of the work. As I have in places pointed out, there are numerous small inconsistencies. It should be possible to precis a theory, here it is not. Has Wilde then no theory, and if he has, what do we mean by the term?

Consideration of the dialogue form should help to elucidate his method of argument:

Dialogue, certainly, . . . can never lose for the thinker its attraction as a mode of expression. By its means he can both reveal and conceal himself, and give form to every fancy, and reality to every mood. By its means he can exhibit the object from each point of view, and show it to us in the round, as a sculptor shows us things gaining in this manner all the richness and reality of effect that comes from those side issues that are suddenly suggested by the central idea in its progress, and really illumine the idea more completely, or from those felicitous after-thoughts that give a fuller completeness to the central scheme, and yet convey something of the delicate charm of chance.²¹⁴

²¹⁴Intentions, pp. 193 - 194.

In his most elaborate dialogue, Wilde shows which virtues especially recommend the form to him. The creative critic is seeking other ends than to propound a system: he is concerned with his own personality, an object, (of thought, perhaps), and an idea.

Besides those which he admits, Wilde has other points of method which tend both to convince the reader and to diverge from the straight-forward. The dialogue is discursive in his hands; it is conversational, and Wilde's most brilliant meter was perhaps conversation. He uses all sorts of stylistic devices: as we can infer from his description above, he will not hesitate to sidetrack an argument at will; neither, as has been pointed out, does he hesitate to transfer an idea airily from one 'sphere' to another and interestedly contemplate its new application. As always, the method of epigram and paradox is used to startle the reader: the first statement of an idea will sound absurd and even farcical: then he gently develops his true meaning, so that we sometimes discover with a shock that this is not such a very new idea after all.

He also has a habit of bewildering the reader into submission with lengthy epigrammatic comparisons whose meaning, if there is one, is often superficial, but whose alliteration is superb and whose manner very convincing:

for, just as Nature is matter struggling into
mind, so Art is mind expressing itself under
the conditions of matter . . .²¹⁵

²¹⁵Intentions, p. 178.

Faithfulness is to the emotional life what consistency is to the life of the intellect - a confession of failures.²¹⁶

At times in fact, to reverse a criticism of his own, 'we feel that he is asking us to accept a crude judgement for the sake of a smart antithesis',²¹⁷ except that he has us trained by virtue of his style not to question too much. Finally he makes another clever use of the dialogue form: each is conducted not by one but by two very intelligent young men, and the one who 'loses' admits defeat after putting the reader's greatest objections to the 'winner' who has a satisfactory answer for everything.

We can reiterate many of Wilde's ideas, but find no system to link them: we cannot even start with some rigid and important definitions of key-words, for we have seen that shift of meaning is a favourite stylistic feature.²¹⁸ How then can we apply the term theory to Wilde? We cannot start, as we might with Coleridge, with the fundamental distinction between fancy and imagination, or even as with Wordsworth, with one dominant idea, such as that of 'a man speaking to men'.

What in fact we do find, not only in Wilde's formal criticism, but throughout his work, even in his letters and reported conversation, despite all the small inconsistencies, are fundamental similarities

²¹⁶Dorian Gray, p. 78.

²¹⁷Reviews, p. 86.

²¹⁸Cf. 'Lying' in Decay of Lying, and 'Criticism' in the Critic as Artist.

of theme, ideas which fascinate him and about which he tends to have always the same kind of things to say: big subjects, such as Art, Beauty, Life and Truth. Why then can we not systematise these to some extent? The first reason is simple but profound; it lies in the progress of Wilde's own mind. The themes appear in different guise in different works: some occur all through, but there is a great deal of development. Much depends on the chronology of the works in question, for parallel with the chronology is the development of Wilde's style which so greatly affects his thought. In the early lectures in America (1882) it is poetic and imitative, full of echoes: in Pen Pencil and Poison and the Decay of Lying (1889) it is easy and self-assured but perhaps a little too startling and paradoxical: in the Critic as Artist (1890) it has reached its most mature point. This is why The Critic as Artist was first considered in this account. Here his style gives him ease, persuasiveness, self-confidence and clearer statement - even clearer thought.

As a short example of this development, here are a few isolated remarks on form or style, an important point. In the lecture of the English Renaissance of Art, given first in New York in January 1882, Wilde says:

But for warrant of its truth such message must have the flame of eloquence in the lips that speak it, splendour and glory in the vision that is its witness, being justified by one thing only - the flawless beauty and perfect form of its expression: this indeed being the social idea, being the meaning of joy in art.²¹⁹

²¹⁹Miscellanies, p. 133.

Here words and ideas are crowded together, and the emphasis on form loses much of its effect. Reviewing the Earl of Carnarvon's translation of the Odyssey in November 1886, he writes:

It is not quite Homer, of course, but no translation can hope to be that, for no work of art can afford to lose its style or to give up the manner that is essential to it.²²⁰

Again, form and style, which are so central in his mature thought, are almost asides: his business here is as a reviewer. In the Decay of Lying (1889) as we have seen, form has more importance, but it is in the novel and dialogue of 1890 that it has most of all:

For the canons of good society are, or should be, the same as the canons of art. Form is absolutely essential to it.²²¹

In the novel, Lord Henry Wootton gives the extreme Hedonistic side of Wilde's thought. But it is in the Critic as Artist that the subject is really explored, and we come to the conclusion that:

In every sphere of life Form is the beginning of things. . . . Yes: Form is everything. It is the secret of life . . . it is Form that creates not merely the critical temperament, but also the aesthetic instinct, that unerring instinct that reveals to one all things under their conditions of beauty. Start with the worship of form, and there is no secret in art that will not be revealed to you.²²²

This attitude remains constant: for example in a letter to More Adey from H.M. Prison, Reading, Wilde wrote:

²²⁰Reviews, p. 105.

²²¹Dorian Gray, p. 229.

²²²Intentions, pp. 207 - 208. Cf. also pp. 127 - 129, 131, 143, 150, 165, 206.

A mirror will give back to one one's own sorrow.
But Art is not a mirror, but a crystal. It
creates its own shapes and forms.²²³

The development of Wilde's style, and the parallel development of his thought is, then, one reason why it is difficult to crystallise a theory from his writings. But we have to return to another and more basic reason for his lack of system. This is his vehement disbelief in system. The conclusion to Pater's Renaissance is the original statement:

The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or what is only conventional, has no real claim on us.²²⁴

It is echoed for instance in Dorian Gray, in Lord Henry's Hedonism:

It was to have its service of the intellect, certainly: yet, it was never to accept any theory of system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience.²²⁵

And Dorian learned likewise:

But he never fell into the error of arresting his intellectual development by any formal acceptance of creed or system, or of mistaking, for a house in which to live, an inn that is but suitable for the sojourn of a night in which there are no stars and the moon is in travail.²²⁶

He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a

²²³Letters, p. 415.

²²⁴Renaissance, p. 237.

²²⁵Dorian Gray, p. 210.

²²⁶Ibid. p. 214.

complex multiform creature that bore within
itself strange legacies of thought and passion,
and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous
maladies of the dead.²²⁷

The basis of Wilde's thought is here, concentrated in the one notion of fluidity and movement. Nothing can be accepted as final: in the intellectual sphere this is equal to shackling one's intellect and preventing the free play of thought that is all-important: in the moral sphere self-denial arrests one's development and is therefore wrong. This passion of Wilde's for freedom of thought goes far to explain his use of paradox, whose main function 'is to bring people to re-examine easy, comfortable assumptions they have come to take for granted. The idea of movement and fluidity is quite fundamental to his thought. All his most compelling ideas are based on it. Literature, for example, is regarded as the highest art because it best solves the problem of representing movement in art.²²⁸ From this desire for fluidity comes his habit of forever changing the context or sphere of his argument. In the Decay of Lying the relations of Art and Life are shown as an evolutionary process.²²⁹ Nature and Life in these dialogues are shown as aspiring towards Art, the very choice of words implying movement.

And of course the crucial passage is the one already examined in Chapter One²³⁰ where change is the mark of the critic, 'The

²²⁷Dorian Gray, p. 230.

²²⁸Intentions, p. 140.

²²⁹Ibid. pp. 22 - 27.

²³⁰P. 23. Ibid. p. 197.

essence of thought, as the essence of Life, is growth'. Insincerity is seen as a 'method of multiplying our personalities'. In the Decay of Lying he pointed out that the interesting thing about a person is the mask he wears; elsewhere, 'It is only the superficial qualities that last. Man's deeper nature is soon found out.'²³¹ Throughout his work he p~~resents~~ poses posing and artificiality as aids to self-expression. Finally, he interpreted Christ in 'De Profundis':

He felt that life was changeful, fluid, active, and that to allow it to be stereotyped into any form was death.²³²

Wilde's admiration for young people was connected with his hatred of system and prejudice. Young people are the most likely to exercise 'free play of the intellect', and least likely to be settled in their ideas. Thus in The Critic as Artist Gilbert says Ernest's views are 'terribly unsound. I am afraid you have been listening to the conversation of some one older than yourself.'²³³ Similarly in the Decay of Lying, Cyril is too old for the exclusive club of Tired Hedonists: many a promising young man 'either falls into careless habits of accuracy, or takes to frequenting the society of the aged and the well-informed'.²³⁴ In Dorian Gray Lord Henry declares that youth is the only thing worth having. In his aphorisms Wilde wrote:

²³¹Phrases and Philosophies.

²³²Letters, p. 485.

²³³Intentions, p. 114.

²³⁴Ibid. p. 10.

The old believe everything: the middle-aged
 suspect everything: the young know everything.²³⁵
 Those whom the gods love grow young.²³⁶

Life, in fine, is seen as an art:²³⁷ natural life is merely the raw material for an art. Posing and artifice are necessary to its form. Insincerity is a good, for by it we can multiply our personalities.²³⁸ Heredity is a good, for by it we can realise the whole life of the race.²³⁹ Thus we increase the scope of our art which is life. People are potentially the greatest works of art. In Pen Pencil and Poison we are told of Wainwright, 'To be suggestive for fiction is to be of more importance than a fact',²⁴⁰ and in Dorian Gray the idea pervades the book. There is the influence of A Rebours on Dorian, parallel to Vivian's description in Decay of Lying of how life copies art. But to the 'elect', such as Dorian, the mysteries of art are revealed either by art or a personality assuming the role of art.²⁴¹ And of Dorian Wilde writes: 'And certainly to him Life itself was the first, and the greatest, of the arts, and for it all the other arts seemed to be but a preparation.'²⁴² Towards the end of the work Lord Henry says to Dorian:

²³⁵Phrases and Philosophies.

²³⁶Letters, p. 869.

²³⁷Cf. Intentions, p. 116.

²³⁸Ibid. p. 197.

²³⁹Ibid. p. 179.

²⁴⁰Ibid. p. 95.

²⁴¹Ibid. p. 148: cf. Dorian Gray, pp. 91 - 92.

²⁴²Dorian Gray, p. 208.

I am so glad that you have never done anything,
 never carved a statue or painted a picture, or
 produced anything outside of yourself! Life has
 been your art. You have set yourself to music.
 Your days are your sonnets.²⁴³

A picture of Wilde's thought begins then to emerge, despite all the evasions, the unwillingness to accept fixity. It is a picture which crystallises in a new and more extended form the idea of the Dandy described by Baudelaire.²⁴⁴ In the dialogues, the Dandy arrives at a kind of philosophy. It is based on the quotation from Pater's Renaissance on Page 78. It is violently and passionately opposed to the acceptance of any single idea or custom merely because it is generally accepted, opposed to mediocrity, to habits, to conventions. The Dandy in intellectual life is the Critic of Gilbert's description, never regarding thought as static, a man superior in his vision to the man of action, and even to the artist, for his basic purpose is detached contemplation, even of himself and his own impressions, the attainment of the widest possible vision, the attainment of 'free play of the mind'. Wilde has shown that action is limiting while thought is free; being is the ideal. In art, as in action, form and style are the essentials.

The advantages of this mode of approaching life and art in the stuffy and circumscribed world of Victorian England are obvious:

²⁴³Dorian Gray, p. 351. Cf. Intentions, p. 148.

²⁴⁴See Chapter One, pp. 28 - 30.

there were many customs, prejudices and attitudes of mind accepted without question, accepted precisely because they were not challenged, attitudes which needed challenging. But the disadvantages are also clear. The passion for beauty, for style, for Art in all things brought attendant dangers: the rejection of all systems of morality often implied for Wilde the rejection of morality altogether, the rejection of the idea of evil. But despite his theorising Wilde believed in the existence of evil, and his abiding obsession with the idea of 'sin' shows that he was conscious of the trouble. The intellectual approach to life and art dominated by the worship of beauty and form, and treating life as an art, inevitably led to a lack of consideration for one's fellow men: Wilde wished to have sympathy with joy, not with suffering, as he often said:- 'One should sympathise with the joy, the beauty, the colour of life. The less said about life's sores the better.'²⁴⁵ But a concentration on beauty which led to ignoring the fact of suffering tended to be a self-corrupting thing. Lack of care for one's fellow creatures, however ugly, because of Art, however beautiful, produced the astonishing effect of warping the personality, or producing a root ugliness in the heart of the artificially created beauty: such is the theme of The Picture of Dorian Gray. The critic, or the Dandy, found that Individualism could very easily become Egotism, and Egotism finds it hard to distinguish between self-realisation, the original aim, and self-indulgence, often the result.

²⁴⁵A Woman of No Importance, p. 22.

But there is no need to dwell here on the imperfections of the system: Wilde's religious and political ideas reveal uneasiness, and when we come to consider his imaginative works we will find a constant working out of the problem of whether his cherished ideas of free play of thought and love of beauty can be fully realised either in art or in life.

CHAPTER THREE

Religion and Politics

The characteristics of Wilde's thought on questions of art are the same characteristics that govern his religious and political outlook. Most important is the question of movement, both chronological in the development of his thought, and fluid in his attitude.

The only formal religion that ever had any deep attraction for Wilde was the Roman Catholic Church. His attitude is constantly ambivalent; on aesthetic grounds, he loved Church ceremonial, and religious mysteries and sacraments had a great fascination for him; on the other hand, he feared and resisted authority in all its forms, and the moral teachings of the Church seemed to him to be wrongful coercion, while the acceptance of dogma was always something alien to him.

A brief chronological sketch of his religious opinions will show the rival claims of Christianity and paganism in his outlook, which was in essence always dominated by his love of art and his belief in Individualism. As a young man, especially as a student, Wilde was more open to influence than later, and we find his feelings more easily swayed, and his ideas more enthusiastically voiced then than they were later. The early poems, along with the letters of his youth, show him as very idealistic. Although they were not published until 1881, most of the poems date from his Oxford days, and they clearly illustrate his conflicting loves of Religion and Art. Art or beauty is often described in religious imagery: images

of the Crucifixion abound.²⁴⁶ His attraction to the Church of Rome is clearly shown in a series of sonnets:

Ah, God! Ah, God! those dear Hellenic hours
Had drowned all memory of Thy bitter pain,
The Cross, the Crown, the Soldiers and the Spear.²⁴⁷

The ceremonial he saw in Italy attracted him by its pageantry, and repelled by its contrast with the 'flowerlike' life of Christ: when 'In splendour and in light the Pope passed home', Wilde's thoughts were of

One who wandered by a lonely sea,
And sought in vain for any place of rest.²⁴⁸

Reaction set in on his return: 'This English Thames is holier far than Rome',²⁴⁹ and he claims to prefer country simplicity to Church ritual, and to the crucified Christ he 'sometime worshipped' he now prefers 'The ancient Gods of Grecian poesy'. His martyr now is Keats, whose grave at Rome he celebrated in one of his own favourite sonnets.²⁵⁰ In 'Panthea' the answer is to embrace fully the life of the senses, and accept the oneness of man and nature:

For man is weak; God sleeps; and heaven is high:
One fiery-coloured moment: one great love; and lo! we die.

Pater's doctrine of the Conclusion to the Renaissance runs in many of these poems, the 'counted number of pulses', and the 'clear, gem-like flame':-

²⁴⁶ E.g. 'The Garden of Eros', 'The Burden of Itys', 'Humanitad'.

²⁴⁷ 'Sonnet written in Holy Week at Genoa'.

²⁴⁸ 'Easter Day'.

²⁴⁹ 'Burden of Itys'.

²⁵⁰ 'The Grave of Keats'.

To burn with one clear flame, to stand erect
 In natural honour, not to bend the knee
 In profitless prostrations whose effect
 Is by itself condemned, what alchemy
 Can teach me this?²⁵¹

These early poems of Wilde, perhaps alone of all his artistic work, are a direct record of personal experience. That they do fairly record his feelings is made clear by a comparison with his intimate letters of the period. The letters chronicle especially his hesitant approaches to the Roman Catholic Church, sometimes self-mocking,²⁵² sometimes sincere and unashamed.²⁵³ He carefully studied Church history, and the evidence we have in the letters²⁵⁴ lends credence to Robert Ross's later statement:- 'Mr. Wilde was equipped moreover for controversy, being deeply read in Catholic philosophy, especially of recent years.'²⁵⁵

There is an interesting letter to his friend William Ward of July 1876 which shows the main strands of his thought at the time.

I confess not to be a worshipper at the Temple of Reason. I think man's reason the most misleading and thwarting guide that the sun looks upon, except the reason of woman. Faith is, I think, a bright lantern for the feet, though of course an exotic plant in man's mind, and requiring continual cultivation,²⁵⁶

Wilde always rejected the claims of reason over Religion as over Art: in The Decay of Lying he pours scorn on those who aim to make

²⁵¹'Humanitad'.

²⁵²E.g. 'I am more than ever in the toils of the Scarlet Woman'. Letters, p. 12. 'Little Popish tendencies', Ibid. p. 33. Cf. also Letters, pp. 21, 30.

²⁵³E.g. 'I shall always remember you at prayer. Adieu and God bless you.' Letters, p. 54. Cf. also pp. 28, 31, 32, 35.

²⁵⁴E.g. pp. 17 - 18.

²⁵⁵Letters, p. 859.

²⁵⁶Letters p. 20

faith easier by explaining away miracles:- 'Man can believe the impossible, but man can never believe the improbable.'²⁵⁷ The letter goes on to discuss his mother's attitude towards religion; it is likely that his own later rejection of dogma was at least strengthened if not directly influenced by his mother's.

My mother would probably agree with you. Except for the people, for whom she thinks dogma necessary, she rejects all forms of superstition and dogma, particularly any notion of priest and sacrament standing between her and God.

Later in the letter we see that Wilde's appreciation of Christianity was not merely aesthetic:-

I wonder you don't see the beauty and necessity for the incarnation of God into man to help us to grasp at the skirts of the Infinite. The atonement is I admit hard to grasp. But I think since Christ the dead world has woken up from sleep. Since him we have lived. I think the greatest proof of the Incarnation aspect of Christianity is its whole career of noble men and thoughts and not the mere narration of unauthenticated histories.

But as well as having a fair understanding of the Church, Wilde had a very sharp understanding of himself, and the elements of his thought and personality which would be hard to reconcile with Catholicism.

I may go over in the vac. I have dreams of a visit to Newman, of the holy sacrament in a new Church, and of a quiet and peace afterwards in my soul. I need not say, though, that I shift with every breath of thought and am weaker and more self-deceiving than ever.

If I could hope that the Church would wake in me some earnestness and purity I would go over as a luxury, if for no better reasons. But I can hardly

²⁵⁷Intentions, p. 51.

hope it would, and to go over to Rome would be to sacrifice and give up my two great gods "Money and Ambition".

Still I get so wretched and low and troubled that in some desperate mood I will seek the shelter of a Church which simply enthrals me by its fascination.²⁵⁸

His clear sight of the motives which drive him towards the Church is remarkable.

The projected visit to Newman is significant, for Newman represents a mind in many ways similar to Wilde's own. If the Catholicism of Wilde's experience had been more dominated by Newman's way of thought, and less in the authoritarian, doctrinal and moral narrowness of the Church he must have observed in Ireland as well as in England, Wilde might well have been able to believe he could have a place in the Catholic Church. On the whole the Church was on the defensive in England: the hierarchy of bishops had been restored only recently; severity and narrowness and almost a 'ghetto' mentality tended to be its most apparent characteristics.

Newman had a very wide and sympathetic mind. 'Here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.'²⁵⁹ Only in Newman would Wilde find a similarity to his own belief in the freedom of the intellect. Newman fully believed in and supported the concept of private judgement, contending for it against the weight of episcopal disapproval,²⁶⁰ and yet his acceptance

²⁵⁸Letters, p. 31.

²⁵⁹Quoted by J.M. Cameron, John Henry Newman, 1956, p. 19.

²⁶⁰See introduction by John Coulson to On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine, 1961, *passim*.

of the Catholic Church was so basic that he had to belong to it, and his relationship with it was fundamentally unaffected by his passionate criticisms:-

There was a true private judgement in the primitive and medieval schools, - there are no schools now, no private judgement (in the religious sense of the phrase), no freedom, that is, of opinion. That is, no exercise of the intellect.²⁶¹

But Newman's example was not sufficient to reassure Wilde: Newman had such certainty, such a belief in system and order in the universe,²⁶² such consciousness of being a creature: with his fundamental desire for independence reinforced by the arrogance of youth, Wilde could not follow suit.

The time of choice, if real choice there ever were, was in the spring of 1877, when Wilde's projected visit to Rome was put off at the insistence of Professor Mahaffy from Dublin, who carried him off to Greece to 'make a good pagan of him'. 'This is an era in my life, a crisis. I wish I could look into the seeds of time and see what is coming.'²⁶³ This indeed marked the turning point in his youthful religious aspirations, but it is wrong to ascribe all the credit to Mahaffy for the 'conversion', as is usually done. It is clear that Wilde very well understood his conflicting longings, and his dominant passion:

wherefore in dreams of Art
And loftiest culture I would stand apart,
Neither for God, nor for his enemies.²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ See introduction by John Coulson to On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine, p. 44.

²⁶² See John Holloway, The Victorian Sage, 1953, pp. 158 - 201 passim.

²⁶³ Letters, p. 34.

²⁶⁴ 'Theoretikos'.

This quotation represents the position that Wilde attempted to maintain through much of his life, and to explore and defend in much of his creative work. The attempt to banish religious considerations from his thought during a large part of his adult life is symptomatic. He very much desired to find a philosophy of life based on his love of art and beauty, and the ideal of individualism, excluding moral or religious rules which claimed a hard and fast precedence over the personal, individual situation. But he did not find it wholly possible to banish moral considerations: these appear in his constant, often almost irritated humanitarian preoccupations, and in his recognition of the reality of what he called sin, which seemed to arise from the realisation that free conduct, following only the ideals of beauty might change the individual in unpleasant ways.

A major factor in his desire for religion was this sense of sin which haunts all his work, as he himself recognised in De Profundis.²⁶⁵ It is present in many of his early poems; in the introductory poem Hélas:-

lo with a little rod
I did but touch the honey of romance -
And must I lose a soul's inheritance?

It is the subject of the sonnet 'E Tenebris', and reappears in 'Taedium Vitae' and in 'Panthea':- O we are wearied of this sense of guilt', and the full conviction of the mal du siècle finds expression in 'Humanitad':-

²⁶⁵Letters, pp. 475 - 476.

Ah! it was easy when the world was young
 To keep one's life free and inviolate,
 From our sad lips another song is rung,
 By our hands our heads are desecrate,
 Wanderers in drear exile, and dispossessed
 Of what should be our own, we can but feed on wild unrest.

Wilde's arrival in London coincides with the disappearance of religious discussion from his letters, and a marked loss of interest in the subject, this is only to be expected, for the intimate correspondence with student friends is replaced by a wider, more general and social correspondence, in which poise and lightness are the essentials. Religion is almost unmentioned in his letters until his prison days. Hellenism had won the battle, and Wilde's 'religion' from now on became more and more personal and individual and informal.

Wilde's attitude to Christ, which grew and strengthened with the years and his rejection of orthodoxy, was very largely conditioned by Renan's Vie de Jésus.²⁶⁶ He read this work early, certainly before the Rise of Historical Criticism (1878). Henceforth he represented Christ solely as man, as artist and as Individualist. But while to disprove the divinity of Christ Renan uses every possible scholarly evidence, Wilde makes no effort to do so: a priori he strips off the 'legends', and regards the gospels as 'prose-poems'.²⁶⁷ But he uses Renan's work as a basis for his own. For both Wilde and Renan, He was a man of genius, but both deny the Resurrection. In the Soul of Man Christ the individualist is

²⁶⁶See Hartley, pp. 242 - 250.

²⁶⁷Letters, p. 483.

invoked to give a justification for the political and economic state for the artist to live: in De Profundis he 'takes his place with the poets', and is regarded as the supreme Romantic artist. His life is seen as an idyll.²⁶⁸ As Hartley points out, he takes this image from Renan:- 'Toute l'histoire du Christianisme naissant est devenu de la sorte une délicieuse pastorale'.²⁶⁹ Wilde accepts completely the results of Renan's critical work, though he cares more for the beauty of symbols than for historical truth. His fascination with the personality of Christ is very clear in the Tales, especially in the Young King and the Star-Child, and in his Poems in Prose. Merle sees in De Profundis no advance on Poems 1881, and declares that Wilde talks of Christ 'comme une sorte de confrère supérieur'.²⁷⁰

In this middle period Wilde was an atheist. He disbelieved in and avoided religious teaching. But he was Christian still in his sense of sin, and his sense of the value of suffering. Merle regards this as an inherent puritanism he cannot escape.²⁷¹ His French biographer Léon Lemonnier wrote of Wilde: 'Il fut toujours indifférent à la religion comme à la science.'²⁷²

Many critics have examined this sense of sin as made manifest in particular in the Tales and Poems in Prose, and have usefully commented upon it. It should be unnecessary, however, to stress

²⁶⁸Letters, p. 478.

²⁶⁹Hartley, p. 245.

²⁷⁰R. Merle, Oscar Wilde, Paris, 1949, p. 132.

²⁷¹Merle, p. 175.

²⁷²L. Lemonnier, La vie d'Oscar Wilde, Paris, 1931, p. 25.

any possibility of suppressed confession, or to go as far as
Lemonnier:

Mais quand le péché devint trop lourd, Wilde eut
besoin de le confesser, dans la solitude où
s'écrivent les livres, avec cette audace que lui
donnait l'impureté et aussi avec cette pudique
transformation que l'art impose.²⁷³

This approach has been over-favoured, and tends to transform the
Works into hunting grounds for amateurs of abnormal sex psychology.
When unhealthy undertones are discovered by Merle even in The
Importance of Being Earnest, it is better to try another approach,
forbearing to quote Wilde, 'To the pure, all things are impure.'
For the present, it is sufficient to realise this thread of suffering
and sin. Roditi traces it to the decadents, commenting that the
development from decadent paganism to mystical Christianity was
quite common, in such characters as Moreau and Huysmans. He finds
in the Poems in Prose too much doctrine and moralising, and in the
Tales contrived and conventional pathos. While Hartley sees the
Tales as leaning heavily on Flaubert and the Poems in Prose as
imitations of Baudelaire, he sees in them also Wilde's messianic
preoccupations, and the influence of the Bible and again of Renan.²⁷⁴
Merle considers that the Tales reflect real pessimism, that good
is unrewarded and trials are not only sad but useless, while
suffering is not accepted. He considers them as proof that Wilde
had a pagan conception of life.²⁷⁵ For Brasol:

²⁷³Lemonnier, p. 81

²⁷⁴Hartley, pp. 99 - 100.

²⁷⁵Merle, pp. 269 - 270.

He told his lovely tales in a true Christian spirit. By prominently introducing into them the eternal theme of Christ, he struck a note that was sure to make every child's heart quiver.²⁷⁶

Although interpretations so deeply vary, all agree on the presence of these themes, and the very variance of interpretation suggests that Wilde had left behind the time of clear meanings and open intentions, and created works which are capable of many explanations.

Wilde usually spoke scornfully of morals, and denied that they had any sway over art, as we have seen, but this is not to say that morals have no place in his own art. As he rebelled against orthodox religion, and provided for himself an ideal of self-development, so he rebelled against the middle-class moral ideas of his time. But he had certain moral themes recurring in his work. The best known case is the controversy over Portrait of Dorian Gray. Wilde wrote many letters on the subject, to the press and to friends, insisting that it had a real and obvious moral, and even seeming to deplore the fact:

And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment . . . Yes; there is a terrible moral in Dorian Gray - a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but which will be revealed to all those whose minds are healthy. Is this an artistic error? I fear it is. It is the only error in the book.²⁷⁷

He shows that he believes a moral should not obtrude itself but be

²⁷⁶B. Brasol, Oscar Wilde. The Man - The Artist, 1938, p. 197.

²⁷⁷Letters, p. 259.

presented only through the characters:

This moral is so far artistically and deliberately suppressed that it does not enunciate its law as a general principle, but realises itself purely in the lives of individuals, and so becomes simply a dramatic element in a work of art, and not the object of the work of art itself.²⁷⁸

This 'moral' of Dorian Gray is typical of Wilde's search for a morality acceptable to the Apostle of art and beauty. He hated the tenets of conventional morality, and constantly criticised them, but at the same time in his works he was investigating the validity of his own philosophy of life. Dorian Gray is a fearless investigation of it on two levels, the social level, where the aesthete as dandy represents Wilde's ideal in his detachment and individuality, and a deeper level, where Wilde faced the difficulty of the search for the 'full life', and the confusion of self-realisation with self-indulgence.

His criticism of accepted moral ideas is expressed clearly in his use of epigram and paradox. As well as showing new aspects of truth, and attacking cosy assumptions, these witticisms show a detestation of cant or humbug, and are the weapons in his constant battle against obtuseness and hypocrisy:

Duty is what one expects from others; it is not what one does oneself.
Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike.
When her third husband died, her hair turned quite gold from grief.
Conscience and cowardice are really the same things.
Conscience is the trade name of the firm.

²⁷⁸Letters, p. 263.

Each class preaches the importance of those virtues it need not exercise. The rich harp on the value of thrift, the idle grow eloquent over the dignity of labour.²⁷⁹

His morality is perhaps best summed up in the oft-repeated maxim in De Profundis: 'The supreme vice is shallowness.'²⁸⁰

A much more personal interest in religion, individual and established, was expressed by Wilde in prison, and to some extent afterwards. There is the intimate personal revelation of De Profundis, the spirited public protest of the letters to the Daily Chronicle on prison reform, and his renewed flirtation with the Roman Catholic Church in Rome, culminating in his death-bed submission. Much controversy has raged over the letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, commonly known as De Profundis, which was published only in expurgated forms until Douglas' death, when Vyvyan Holland published an edition. A full and complete version is contained in the collected Letters edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962. Ross published extracts, amounting to less than half the letter, in 1905; he printed only those passages which have no reference to Douglas, and has been much blamed for misrepresentation in so doing.

But some justification for this is to be found in Wilde's letter of April 1897, intended to accompany the Douglas letter to Ross. Wilde first states that some day he wishes the truth of his relationship with Douglas to be known:- 'Some day the truth will have to be known . . . I don't defend my conduct. I explain it.'

²⁷⁹Examples from H. Pearson, The Life of Oscar Wilde, 1946, pp. 194 - 195, 202.

²⁸⁰Letters, p. 425, etc.

But he continues:

Also there are in the letter certain passages which deal with my mental development in prison, and the inevitable evolution of character and intellectual attitude towards life that has taken place: and I want you, and others who still stand by me and have affection for me, to know exactly in what mood and manner I hope to face the world . . . Of course I need not remind you how fluid a thing thought is with me - with us all - and of what an evanescent substance are our emotions made.²⁸¹

Wilde also actively expressed the wish that for two friends excerpts which he details, and also 'anything else you may extract that is good and kind in intention' should be separately typed.

I know both these sweet women will be interested to know something of what is happening to my soul - not in the theological sense, but merely in the sense of the spiritual consciousness that is separate from the actual occupations of the body.

Much of the letter is religious in the fullest sense, but not in the sense of conforming to any one faith. Christ is a major subject, but in his human, not his divine role.²⁸² The life and teachings of Christ are regarded as example and proof of Wilde's personal philosophy:- He who would lead a Christ-like life must be entirely and absolutely himself.²⁸³ Wilde has an artistic explanation, often borrowed in its basis from Renan, for the theological affirmation of the Divinity of Christ.

He alone saw that on the hills of time there were but God and Man, and, feeling through the mysticism of sympathy that in himself each had been made incarnate, he calls himself the Son of the One or the son of the other, according to his mood.²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ Letters, pp. 512 - 513.

²⁸² Especially pp. 476 - 489.

²⁸³ Letters, p. 476.

²⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 478.

As for his miracles:

His miracles seem to me as exquisite as the coming of Spring, and quite as natural. I see no difficulty at all in believing that such was the charm of his personality that his mere presence could bring peace to souls in anguish, and that those who touched his garments or his hands forgot their pain . . .

For Wilde, Christ was not a moralist:

His morality is all sympathy, just what morality should be . . . Christ had no patience with the dull lifeless mechanical systems that treat people as if they were things, and so treat everybody alike: as if anybody, or anything for that matter, was like aught else in the world. For him there were no laws: there were exceptions merely.²⁸⁵

As Wilde saw him, Christ lived a life which was a work of art:-

'his entire life also is the most perfect of poems'.²⁸⁶ His essence was his sympathetic imagination. This enabled him to see himself as the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah:

Every single human being should be the fulfilment of a prophecy. For every human being should be the realisation of some ideal, either in the mind of God or in the mind of man.²⁸⁷

It also enables him to make himself the 'eternal mouth-piece of the dumb and suffering'. 'His desire was to be to the myriads who had found no utterance a very trumpet through which they might call to Heaven.'²⁸⁸ His imagination makes him 'the precursor of the Romantic movement in life'.²⁸⁹ His creed was self-development

²⁸⁵Letters, p. 485.

²⁸⁶Ibid. p. 477.

²⁸⁷Ibid. p. 481.

²⁸⁸Ibid. p. 481.

²⁸⁹Ibid. p. 484.

and self-perfection:

It is man's soul that Christ is always looking for . . . one only realises one's soul by getting rid of all alien passions, all acquired culture, and all external possessions be they good or evil.

His greatest teaching was love:

The fact that God loves man shows that in the divine order of ideal things it is written that eternal love is to be given to what is eternally unworthy . . . Love is a sacrament that should be taken kneeling, and Domine, non sum dignus should be on the lips and in the hearts of those who receive it.²⁹⁰

The necessity for regarding Christ as Man and denying any question of His Divinity arose naturally from Wilde's rejection of 'any theory or idea or system' which might demand the sacrifice of any part of experience: He saw that if Christ is accepted as God, even His teaching, which Wilde accepted and interpreted as intensely personal and beautiful, acquires a universal significance, and becomes in some sense rules which can be held superior to any particular personal situation.

On this view of Christ Wilde builds his own religion, which finds an answer for the first time to his constant theme of sin and suffering. The basis is self-knowledge: 'Whatever is realised is right'.²⁹¹ Love is the essential,²⁹² and Hate the 'eternal Negation'.²⁹³ He insists that he must find his own salvation

²⁹⁰Letters, p. 484.

²⁹¹Ibid. p. 425.

²⁹²Ibid. p. 452.

²⁹³Ibid. p. 450.

without the help of morality, religion or reason.²⁹⁴ Everything must be found within himself. His former mode of life, all in 'the sunny side of the garden', had to end, because it was 'limiting'. But it was wrong for Wilde, an Individualist, to appeal to society for help.²⁹⁵ Often he seems to feel the need to insist on the uniqueness of his personal religion, and does so by his use of words:

I need not tell you that to me Reformations in Morals are as meaningless and vulgar as Reformations in Theology. But while to propose to be a better man is a piece of unscientific cant, to have become a deeper man is the privilege of those who have suffered.²⁹⁶

He accepts ultimate responsibility for his own ruin.²⁹⁷ Of his homosexuality he writes:

Sins of the flesh are nothing. They are maladies for physicians to cure, if they should be cured. Sins of the soul alone are shameful.²⁹⁸

He blames himself because, instead of being devoted to Art, he let himself be 'lured into the imperfect world of coarse uncompleted passions, of appetite without distinction, desire without limit, and formless greed.'²⁹⁹

Desire, at the end, was a malady, or a madness, or both. . . . I ceased to be Lord over myself. I was no longer the Captain of my Soul, and did not know it.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁴Letters, pp. 468 - 469.

²⁹⁵Ibid. p. 492.

²⁹⁶Ibid. p. 489.

²⁹⁷Ibid. pp. 429 - 430.

²⁹⁸Ibid. p. 452.

²⁹⁹Ibid. p. 463.

³⁰⁰Ibid. p. 466.

'Self-realisation' had led him to self-indulgence, and had corrupted him as it had corrupted the Happy Prince, the Star-Child and Dorian Gray.

The greatest discovery Wilde made in prison was the value of suffering. It is no longer pointless as he had thought it:-

'Now I find hidden away in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is meaningless, and suffering least of all.'³⁰¹ Now he believes that there is no sin which cannot find

forgiveness,³⁰² no past that cannot be altered. A man must realise his past - Wilde must forgive Alfred Douglas. As soon as a man repents, his life is no longer sinful:

the moment the prodigal son fell on his knees and wept he really made his having wasted his substance with harlots, and then kept swine and hungered for the husks they ate, beautiful and holy incidents in his life.³⁰³

Exterior denunciations have no value, but Wilde thought as he listened from the dock to his life being reviled, that if he himself could say it, it would be altered for ever:

A man's very highest moment is, I have no doubt at all, when he kneels in the dust, and beats his breast, and tells all the sins of his life.³⁰⁴

After Wilde left prison, he wrote two lengthy letters published in the Daily Chronicle on 27 May 1897, and 23 March 1898. In the first of these, he protested vigorously against the dismissal of

³⁰¹Letters, p. 467.

³⁰²Ibid. p. 439.

³⁰³Ibid. p. 487.

³⁰⁴Ibid. p. 502.

a warder for an act of kindness, and against the treatment of children in prison and the fact of their being there at all. He also protested against the treatment of the insane and weak minded, and declared that the treatment drove some mad. In the second, he scourged the three main abuses of the prison system, hunger, insomnia and disease. These letters come from a new apprehension of the suffering of others, and are essentially humanitarian, those of a man who has learned to sympathise with the suffering of others. The Ballad of Reading Gaol has the same roots. Wilde had a horror of capital punishment, and expressed it vividly by showing the mental torment of the condemned man before his execution. The Ballad takes its inspiration from life, not from art. Fehr has been able to find only seven sources of detail.^{304 a} This is new for Wilde, and the theme of the poem links the guilt of the condemned, and of the law, with universal guilt:-

Yet each man kills the thing he loves
Yet each man does not die.

Wilde was aware that the poem was a mixture of art and propaganda, and for the first time was willing to sacrifice the former to the latter.³⁰⁵

After prison, Wilde's behaviour was not that of the 'deeper man' of De Profundis. Apart from an abortive attempt to enter a Roman Catholic retreat,³⁰⁶ he soon resumed his old life, more hopeless than before, for after he wrote the Ballad Art ceased her struggle

^{304a} Op.cit.p.201

³⁰⁵ Letters, pp. 654, 661.

³⁰⁶ Ibid. pp. 563 - 564.

against his 'spells of senseless ease'. At Berneval he took some interest in the Church,³⁰⁷ but soon he was as bored with it as with Berneval itself. It was not until his visit to Rome in 1900 that he renewed his youthful enthusiasm for the Roman Catholic Church.

Ross wrote:

He wanted me then to introduce him to a priest with a view to being received into the Church, and I reproach myself deeply for not having done so, but I really did not think he was quite serious.³⁰⁸

This enthusiasm now took the form of a tremendous admiration and affection for the Pope, whose audiences he many times attended. But he could not overcome his distaste for the Church as a social body: 'I am not a Catholic: I am simply a violent Papist.'³⁰⁹

When Wilde died in Paris in November 1900, he was received into the Church by a Passionist priest called by Ross:

You know I had always promised to bring a priest to Oscar when he was dying, and I felt rather guilty that I had so often dissuaded him from becoming a Catholic, but you know the reasons for doing so.³¹⁰

Wilde's political opinions are almost inseparable from his religious ideas, for the same themes, chiefly Individualism and secondly suffering, are the mainsprings of both. Again, Individualism is his basic creed and aim: suffering is his basic difficulty. His interest in politics was less strong and firm than his religious strain, but it is worthy of being taken seriously especially in the Soul of

³⁰⁷Letters, pp. 582, 585, 598 - 599.

³⁰⁸Ibid. p. 859.

³⁰⁹Ibid. p. 825.

³¹⁰Ibid. p. 854.

Man Under Socialism. There are four main sources we can trace it in; the early poems and Vera, the Tales, The Soul of Man, and the letters to the Daily Chronicle.

The political ideas of the early poems are simple, idealistic and republican. Hartley claims his reading was founded on Fourier, Saint Simon, Tocqueville and Proudhon, and he was probably also influenced by such novels as Hugo's Les Miserables.³¹¹ His opinions are sweeping, and expressed emotionally. He glories in the ideas of republicanism and democracy, as against the tyranny of kings:-

Yet when this fiery web is spun,
Her watchman shall destroy from far
The young Republic like a sun
Rise from these crimson seas of war.³¹²

Thus it is 'my first attempt at political prophecy'.³¹³ This poem, 'Ave Imperatrix', celebrates English glory but prefers a republic to Empire. In the sonnet 'Louis Napoleon', France is glorified as 'free and republican', and in 'Urbs Sacra Aeterna' Wilde looks back with regret on the days when Rome ruled the world with her 'sword republican'. His heroes are those of republican England, Cromwell and Milton. He celebrates Milton in 'The Garden of Eros'; both Cromwell and Milton are highly regarded in 'Quantum Mutata', and the 'Sonnet to Milton' mourns the passing of his spirit, and ends:-

Dear God! is this the land
Which bare a triple empire in her hand
When Cromwell spake the word Democracy!

³¹¹Hartley, p. 50.

³¹²'Ave Imperatrix'.

³¹³Letters, p. 68.

Passing the Tuileries in 1883, Wilde remarked to Robert Sherard:-
 'There is not there one little blackened stone which is not to me
 a chapter in the Bible of Democracy.'³¹⁴

His main theme is love of liberty and hatred of oppression.
 This is characteristic of his Individualism. But he also feared
 and disliked what he called anarchy - the rule of the people - which
 he was later to denigrate once more in The Soul of Man, under the
 name of democracy. His poems reflect the conflict - the 'Sonnet
 to Liberty' describes the 'roar' of democracies, the 'reigns of
 Terror and great Anarchies' - yet he cannot but sympathise with the
 fight for freedom:-

and yet, and yet,
 These Christs that die upon the barricades,
 God knows it I am with them, in some things.

The problem is most clearly stated in 'Libertatis Sacra Fames':-

Albeit nurtured in democracy,
 And liking best that state republican
 Where every man is kinglike and no man
 Is crowned above his fellows, yet I see,
 Spite of this modern fret for Liberty,
 Better the rule of One, whom all obey,
 Than to let clamorous demagogues betray
 Our freedom with the kiss of anarchy.

As for Vera, the play certainly has 'avowedly republican
 sentiments',³¹⁵ as it mirrors the conflict between Despotism and
 Nihilism in nineteenth century Russia:- in fact, mirrored it too
 well, for the murder of Czar Alexander II in March 1881 prevented

³¹⁴R.H. Sherard, The Real Oscar Wilde, 1917, p. 36.

³¹⁵Letters, p. 71.

the playing of Vera in England. But the politics seem chosen merely to give a dramatic background to the passions of the play:

As regards the play itself, I have tried in it to express within the limits of Art that Titan cry of the peoples for liberty, which in the Europe of our day is threatening thrones, and making governments unstable from Spain to Russia, and from north to southern seas. But it is a play not of politics but of passion. It deals with no theories of government, but with men and women simply; and modern nihilistic Russia, with all the terror of its tyranny and the marvel of its martyrdoms, is merely the fiery and fervent background in front of which the persons of my dream live and love.³¹⁶

The enthusiasm of his support for 'Liberty' may stem from his mother, who as Speranza took a prominent part in Irish Home Rule struggles,³¹⁷ but he was never a fervent politician; he declared in 1885 'I believe I am a radical'.

The themes of many of the tales in A House of Pomegranates and The Happy Prince have a moral-political bias. The poverty and distress of the workers who provide beautiful things for the rich is dwelt on, particularly in The Young King. The youth himself, brought up in poverty, then recognised as king, has at first an adoration for beauty which makes him proud, vain and heedless of others. But he has three dreams, in which he sees poor, wretched people toiling to produce his coronation robes, and realises that the rich make slaves of the poor. In the last dream, Death and Avarice contend for the souls of the workers. The young king is obsessed by his responsibility for these conditions, and refuses to

³¹⁶Letters, p. 148.

³¹⁷Cf. Ibid. p. 80.

wear the robes. But a poor man tells him that he cannot thus alter things, and it is his duty to provide a figurehead for them: the Bishop reiterates that he cannot change things, and affirms that one man cannot take all the sins of the world on his shoulders. The young man, however, goes poorly clad to the coronation, and is crowned by God. In this tale, as in the others, Wilde produced no economic system of equitable distribution: he simply denounced the causes from which so much misery sprang. It is possible to see the young king's revolt solely in terms of beauty turning against the ugliness of slavery and oppression. Wilde's use of the terms beauty and ugliness can sometimes be equated to the simple moral good and bad.

The Star-Child also selfishly loves beauty, and has to suffer greatly before he learns the beauty of kindness and charity. The poor wood-cutters at the outset realise that 'life is for the rich'. But 'riches' also change in meaning. The Happy Prince loves beauty - or good - so much that he sacrifices his eyes and his very self to help the poor and diseased until he himself becomes ugly and useless. The most biting story in its undercurrents is perhaps The Devoted Friend, where the rich miller, by the help of splendid oratory, persuades himself of his own extreme generosity while draining his poor little friend Hans of his goods, his energy and his livelihood - all of which the simple, loving Hans gives freely. This tale is in many senses a biting satire on the comfortable capitalist assumptions of the nineteenth century.

Before considering The Soul of Man as a work of late nineteenth century socialism, it is useful to examine the theories that have been put forward as to its origin. Two main influences have been suggested, each as a whole solution. Edouard Roditi claims that the Soul of Man, like much of the Critic as Artist is influenced by Wilde's discovery of Chuang Tzu, the Taoist philosopher, whose translated work Wilde reviewed in 1890. Roditi points out that the Critic as Artist Part II and the Soul of Man were also written in that year. He sees in the Critic as Artist 'a consciously Taoist anarchism of inaction'.³¹⁸

Merle and Hartley, on the other hand, ascribe many of the same ideas to Wilde's reading of Renan. Merle recalls Wilde's statement:

I remember once hearing M. Renan say that he would sooner live under a military despotism than under despotism of the Church, because the former merely limited the freedom of action, while the latter limited the freedom of mind.³¹⁹

This idea is greatly expanded in the Soul of Man. Hartley finds 'remarkable parallels' between Renan and Wilde on the social role of Jesus.³²⁰ He also quotes Renan's anticipation of one of the central doctrines of the Critic as Artist:³²¹

Le temps viendra où l'art sera une chose du passé, une création faite une fois pour toutes, création des âges non réfléchi, qu'on adorera, tout en recommandant qu'il n'y a plus à en faire.

³¹⁸E. Roditi, Oscar Wilde, Norfolk, Connecticut, 1947, p. 85.

³¹⁹Miscellanies, p. 145.

³²⁰Hartley, p. 248.

³²¹Ibid. p. 251.

Chuang Tzu certainly presented a philosophy very attractive to Wilde; his wit and paradox, his exaltation of thought over action, were already typical of Wilde. It is difficult to describe him as an influence, because there was really a discovery of a similar-thinking mind. Brian Nicholas, in his essay on the connection of Renan's L'Avenir de la Science and the Soul of Man, has shown the temporary enthusiasm that inspired Wilde to this work. Hartley gives the Vie de Jésus, along with Marc-Aurèle and Dialogues et Fragments Philosophiques as sources for the Soul of Man,³²² but Nicholas finds detailed and convincing parallels with L'Avenir de la Science in particular. L'Avenir was an early work, but not published until April 1890, while the Soul of Man was published in February 1891. Nicholas suggests that it was the youthful Renan who fired Wilde's imagination, and the fact that they shared the same enemies, materialism and the bourgeois attitude. Renan anticipates Wilde in his arguments on slavery, machinery, and the French Revolution: they share the same positive prophetic language, and Renan emphasises the importance of ideals as Wilde does the importance of Utopias. Both are strongly against democracy, as also against the Papacy or any 'despotism of ideas':

The grand reign of the Spirit will not commence
until the material world shall be completely
under man's control.³²³

³²²Hartley, p. 241.

³²³E. Renan, Future of Science, 1891, p. 71.

The striving of the poorer classes after material welfare is just, legitimate and sacred, seeing that the poorer classes cannot attain real holiness, by which I mean moral and intellectual perfection, unless they acquire a certain degree of material welfare.³²⁴

This is clearly in line with Wilde's thought.³²⁵

Both Wilde and Renan idealise Ancient Greece; Renan's new world will be 'la Grèce sans l'esclavage', and then: 'To tend one's beautiful humanity will then be the Law and the Prophets.'³²⁶ For Wilde, the new Individualism 'will be complete, and through it each man will attain to his perfection. The new Individualism is the new Hellenism.'³²⁷

It is necessary to examine the essay now on its own merits, as a socialist work of the 1890's. To explore this question I propose to examine The Soul of Man in comparison with two very different types of contemporary Socialist, represented by the Fabians on the one side, and on the other by William Morris. We shall find diametrical opposition of thought, especially between Wilde and the Fabians, led by Sidney Webb, but we shall find unexpected agreements also.

Wilde flings down the gauntlet to the Fabians near the beginning of his essay: 'Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism.'³²⁸ This is doubly meaningful in the

³²⁴E. Renan, Future of Science, 1891, p. 73.

³²⁵Cf. Intentions, p. 134. -

³²⁶Future of Science, p. 90.

³²⁷Intentions, p. 335.

³²⁸Ibid. p. 276.

light of contemporary Socialist-Collectivist thinking. There is the obvious and most important meaning, which is grasped by any reader; the Wildean idea of individualism is now familiar. But in the other sense the phrase was particularly striking to the politically minded reader. 'We have been suffering for a century from an acute outbreak of individualism, unchecked by the old restraints, and invested with almost a religious sanction by a certain soulless school of writers.'³²⁹ Sidney Webb had a healthy dislike of and respect for 'the Devil of Individualism':

In 1880 we may almost say that an unsystematic and empirical Individualism reigned supreme. Not in one political party alone, or in one class of society, but in all alike, we find the assumption that the forms of government ought to be reduced to the barest minimum; that free competition, leading as it does to the survival of the fittest, was the only sure foundation of a prosperous state; and that the incessant 'private war which leads each man to strive to place himself on another's shoulders and remain there', was, on the whole, a benevolent dispensation of Providence, and part of the Laws of Nature, not impiously to be interfered with.³³⁰

Although the two uses of the term 'Individualism' are different, the use of the term in Wilde's essay must have some intended double meaning, and at the outset marks the unique quality of Wilde's Socialism. Webb sees Individualism as the great enemy of Socialism: Wilde sees Socialism as an instrument towards Individualism.

Now it is clear that Webb usually regards Individualism in the sense of a worn-out Liberalism advocating laissez-faire, unrestricted

³²⁹ Fabian Society, Facts for Socialists, Fabian Tracts, No. 5, 1886, p. 16.

³³⁰ S. Webb, Socialism: True and False, Fabian tract, No. 51, 1894, p. 3.

private enterprise, and the least possible government. But even when he comes to talk of something much nearer Wilde's idea, his natural sympathy with it is quashed by its conflict with his principle. Under the heading of 'Industrial Anarchism', he describes the longing of working men to be their own masters, and sympathises:

But the desire of each man to become his own master is part of the old Adam of Individualism . . . Socialists who hanker after these delights have forgotten their Karl Marx. The steam-engine, the factory and the mine have come to stay: and our only choice is between their management by individual owners or their management by the community . . . the worker is and must be the servant of the community.³³¹

These words contain the seeds of the disagreements, three-cornered, between Morris, Wilde and Webb. Much of Wilde's essay is concerned not with Socialism at all, but with the general problem of artistic individualism, and as such does not concern us here. We will consider only such parts of the essay as can be compared with Fabian or literary Socialism.

Wilde's approach to Socialism was directed to the freeing of man, and especially the artist, for true Individualism. It was, then, artistic in its essence, and thus comparable to Morris's. Morris was led to Socialism by his desire to create a way of life fit for a workman of genius. Following Ruskin and Carlyle, he wished to restore art and individuality to the workman. He saw the tendency towards standardised production as destructive of the soul of man.

³³¹ Fabian Society, The Basis and Policy of Socialism, 1908, p. 70.

(It is interesting to note that the idea of the 'soul of man' occurs in Wilde and Morris only, not in Fabian literature.) He wanted men to be able to put themselves into their work and express their own personalities, thus restoring the Ruskinian ideal of 'joy in work'. Morris's reasons for admiring the Medieval trade guilds were three-fold, the absence of division of labour, the direct relation between craftsman and consumer, and the local nature of craftsmanship. Morris is in a sense a central figure between Wilde and Webb: he became a Socialist through Art, like Wilde, but his central concern, like Webb's, was with the workman and his life. He was a true and practical Socialist, and also a dreamer.

Morris was opposed to the idea of art for art's sake: his aims were life and happiness. He followed Ruskin, but his gospel of joy in work was less Puritan. He was a frank hedonist, and work attracted him because he liked it, because he felt that fine craftsmanship was a two-fold inducer of happiness, giving pleasure to both producer and consumer. In How I Became a Socialist he says:

The study of history and the love and practice of art forced me into a hatred of the civilisation, which if things were to stop as they are would turn history into inconsequent nonsense, and make art a collection of the curiosities of the past, which would have no serious relation to the life of the present.³³²

In the importance they give to art, Wilde and Morris would seem to be united, but in fact Wilde's Socialism would exist principally for the production of more, far more, works of fine art, while Morris's

³³²Quoted H. Jackson, William Morris, 1908, p. 44.

would abolish it. One of the Ruskinian ideas Wilde never accepted was that the working craftsman, the true 'artist', would make fine art superfluous, that beauty was to be reached in some degree by all, not superabundantly by the few.

Morris differed from Webb in that he never believed in the Fabian idea of state Socialism, or Collectivism, with a central organisation.³³³ His love of variety and colour revolted at the uniformity and regularity of State Socialism implied by the methods of Sidney Webb or Lenin. His keynote was association and decentralisation. To both Wilde and Morris the Fabian ideal would appear as real slavery.

This brings us to examine the complex question of Authority, which is inextricably bound up with Individualism of any kind. It can best be analysed by comparing the three different aims of these three very different Socialists, Wilde, Morris and Webb. In The Soul of Man Wilde is concerned most with the question of Individualism versus Authority. Socialism is in many ways incidental or at least less important. Wilde believed that, shorn of ever-constraining authority each man and woman could be a completely free personality, living a 'flowerlike life'. He believed not only in imaginatively realised individualism, but in 'the great actual Individualism latent and potential in mankind generally'.³³⁴ The Soul of Man is a wide analysis of the factors preventing this state

³³³How I became a Socialist and Commonweal 1885 - Journal of Socialist League, Manifesto.

³³⁴Intentions, p. 283.

for all men and especially for the artist. To Webb, Wilde would certainly be an anarchist, for his desire to abolish present authority is not motivated by its unfairness or oppression, but by a conviction of the evil of authority itself, and he prefers minority rule to the rule of the people, which he thinks of as mob rule.³³⁵ He describes past and present sources of authority, and points out that only in art has true individualism ever been possible, and that because of the conditions this has never been perfected. He complains that even now the tyranny of public taste is all too prevalent in many art forms. 'Authority over him [the artist] and his art is ridiculous.'³³⁶ But Wilde is not free of the concept of authority; he wants it to come from art. Speaking of taste he says:- 'The work of art is to dominate the spectator, the spectator is not to dominate the work of art.'³³⁷ He is then proposing, at least in artistic matters, an aristocracy of taste, and is in fact promoting a mystique of great art which he over-emphasises in his eagerness.

His form of Socialism, then, would be principally a means of getting rid of authority; he envisages, not perhaps entirely seriously, a kind of free yet peaceful anarchy, not so much because he is joking as because in this connexion he is not really concerned with Socialism at all.

³³⁵Intentions, pp. 323 - 324.

³³⁶Ibid. p. 322.

³³⁷Ibid. p. 317.

As regards individualism and authority, Morris looked back longingly to the Middle Ages, with the amicable authority of the trade guilds, and artistic effort performed freely, yet under a guiding hand. His ideal authority is more in the form of 'influence'. Ruskin expounds this idea:

There is no wealth but life. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy and of admiration. That country is the richest which houses the greatest numbers of noble and happy human beings: that man is richest, who having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others.³³⁸

The authority Morris most feared was not a political authority: it was the tyranny of the machine over personal expression and men's lives. His Socialist state would provide equality of opportunity and equal access to necessities; it would not necessarily be devoid of rank, in something like the Medieval guild sense, master, journeyman, apprentice. In News from Nowhere the problem of authority is solved by abolition of property and the absolute minimum of local self-government; but of course it still poses very many questions.

Local government versus central government is the main question of authority for the Fabians. They did not question the need for authority and government. This was one of the points which made them so distasteful to the nineteenth century liberals. Herbert Spencer, the great Individualist, demanded of Liberalism: 'How is

³³⁸Quoted William Sinclair, Socialism according to William Morris. Fortnightly Review, 1910.

it that Liberalism, getting more and more into power, has grown more and more coercive in its legislation?'³³⁹ And Auberon Herbert talked warningly of 'always immoral state interference'.³⁴⁰ Besides naturally being distasteful to Capitalist owners, the degrees of state control proposed by the Fabians was most distasteful to the average Englishman. Marx had foreseen a long period of state control, gradually dissolving into local self-government in collectives, but the Fabians seemed to put no end to it. Sidney Webb announced as one of 'the preliminary steps in the conversion of England' that:

The best government is no longer 'that which governs least', but 'that which can safely and advantageously administer most!'³⁴¹

Instead of converting every man into an independent producer, working when he likes and as he likes, we aim at enrolling every able-bodied person directly in the service of the community, for such duties and under such organisation . . . as may be suitable to his capacity and social function.³⁴²

The Fabian position briefly described as a whole may serve to highlight the gaps and tangents in both Morris and Wilde. The necessary reading for the Fabian Socialist or Collectivist was Marx' Das Kapital, and Henry George's Progress and Poverty and The Law of Human Progress. Very extensive quotations were habitually made from such authors as J.S. Mill, in particular his Political Economy, and Charles Booth's Labour and Life of the People. Many

³³⁹ and ³⁴⁰Quoted Beatrice Webb My Apprenticeship, 1926.

³⁴¹Sidney Webb, in The Basis and Policy of Socialism, p. 57.

³⁴²Ibid. p. 71.

Fabians, in particular George Bernard Shaw and the Webbs, strove to reduce Socialism to an intellectual rather than an emotional creed. The almost hysterical emotionalism of some parts of Henry George was where possible ignored:

Can it be that the gifts of the Creator may be thus misappropriated with impunity? Is it a light thing that labour should be robbed of its earnings while greed rolls in wealth - that the many should want while the few are surfeited? Turn to history, and on every page may be read that such wrong never goes unpunished; that the Nemesis that follows injustice never falters nor sleeps! ³⁴³

The emotion was retained, however, in a constant emotionless manner incorporating a very emotional use of figures:

Only 39 out of every 1,000 persons dying, leave behind them £300 worth of property, and only 61 per 1,000 leave any property worth mentioning at all. ³⁴⁴
More than one third of the entire income of the United Kingdom is enjoyed by less than one thirtieth of its people. ³⁴⁵

Sidney Webb describes the beginning of Fabianism in Socialism: True and False; how they rejected the original idea of necessary revolution:

We were sadly and sorrowfully driven to the conclusion that no sudden or simultaneous transformation of society from an Individualist to a Collectivist basis was possible or even thinkable . . . In short, we repudiated the common assumption that Socialism was necessarily bound up with Insurrectionism on the one hand or Utopianism on the other. ³⁴⁶

Unlike Morris, the Fabians rejected 'catastrophic Socialism'.

³⁴³Law of Human Progress, New York, 1879, pp. 118 - 119.

³⁴⁴Facts for Socialists, 1886, p. 11.

³⁴⁵Ibid. p. 10.

³⁴⁶Basis and Policy of Socialism, p. 51.

The Socialist ideal was the Nationalisation of land and capital, and the abolition of private property, all undertakings to be run on a Collectivist basis. This policy they elevated almost to a religion, Webb referring constantly to 'the conversion of England', and 'our Socialist faith':

Wise prophets nowadays do not found a partial community which adopts the whole faith; they cause rather the partial adoption of their faith by the whole community.³⁴⁷

This is the centre of the Fabian method; all their aims, they said, could be brought to fruit by waiting, teaching, pressing for reform and spreading education. They expected to attain all their ends quietly by 'the gradualness of inevitability', 'until all men would drop their selfishness and began thinking in communities'. As far as remedying the present situation went, their opinion was the same as Wilde's, that charity paid by the beneficiaries of an unjust system merely prolongs the system; they believed only in enlightened philanthropy, only giving where there was hope of improvement. Their main task, as Webb saw it, was the study and statistical analysis of social problems:- 'The most one can do is to attempt to see truly what is really happening, without attempting to foretell what will, from that, result.'³⁴⁸ Sidney Webb said further:

There is no more fruitful service to the Socialist cause than . . . to study in the light of the ascertained facts some one of the many social problems to which we have to apply our Socialist faith. Depend upon it, the first step to getting

³⁴⁷Basis and Policy of Socialism, p. 59.

³⁴⁸My Apprenticeship.

what we want is a very clear and precise knowledge of what it is that we want.³⁴⁹

Their philosophy was very practical, which differentiated it from those of Morris and Wilde, for it dealt with what were the actual circumstances of their day. They accepted and welcomed the division of labour, the use of machinery, the standardisation of production.

Their aim was, briefly, to take over the country for the people, for each man to be, as citizen and elector, in a limited sense his own master. It is indeed a limited ideal of freedom and justice, and appears to be very specifically tied up to material questions only. This is where the greatest distance separates Wilde and Morris from the Fabians. Wilde in his plans for the cultivated life, and Morris in his dismissal of the machine are widely at variance with Webb here.

If we measure Morris by this yardstick we shall find great differences. In his reading, first, he also was influenced by Karl Marx, and in another direction by Ruskin. His attitude to the Fabian idea described above was that it was merely 'substituting businesslike administration in the interests of the public for the old Whig muddle of laissez-faire backed up by coercion.'³⁵⁰ His Socialist ideas were, as Webb would have put it, both Insurrectionist and Utopian. He believed with Marx that revolution was inevitable, but was too ready to believe in the ability of revolution to solve problems. In News from Nowhere he combines both revolution and

³⁴⁹Basis and Policy of Socialism, p. 59.

³⁵⁰W. Morris, Communism, Fabian Tract No. 115, p. 7.

Utopia, but idyllic as it is, it is recognisable that the system propounded there was quite impracticable. The Morris ideal of simplicity, of limitation of wants, and the plain life just would not be accepted by the masses. He alone was in this sense a true Socialist. The working class had been deprived for too long of the benefits of the machine to acquiesce in its abolition and believe in its bad effects. Workmen wanted all the 'mechanical clutter' they could get, as the Fabians realised.

But dreams apart, Morris said that a Socialist party must bring into being a real social consciousness among the workers, so that in the end 'they understand themselves to be face to face with false society, themselves the only possible elements of true society.'³⁵¹ He recognised all the improvements in the condition of the working class as in themselves good, but not enough without a further spiritual improvement which the Fabians ignored. He desired the abolition of private property for the sake of justice, of equality of opportunity, and of simplicity of life. In News from Nowhere he describes very precisely the evils of property, - how, for instance, it has corrupted the state of marriage. Without it, he says, there is no need for divorce courts. The picture he paints in News from Nowhere is fundamentally attractive and much of his theory illustrated therein is fine and practical, but it is built on a most unlikely hypothesis, that men would consent, for the sake of simplicity, to give up all the material goods which the nineteenth century had

³⁵¹Communism, p. 10.

taught them were both the pre-requisites and the highest aims of life. Where the Fabians made Society their religion, Morris's was happiness, achieved through right working conditions, in turn achieved through Socialism, Morris as an active Socialist rather than as a Visionary was a more practical man, as can be seen from his writing in the Commonweal and his lectures, but his 'literary Socialism', The Dream of John Ball and News from Nowhere was by far the best known.

In contrast to the Fabian idea of steady constitutional change, and Morris' impractical ideas of revolution, the means which Wilde proposed for the introduction of Socialism were - none. He believed, he said, in the necessity of revolution, but concerned himself not at all with its methods. 'The conditions will be done away with, and human nature will change.'³⁵² He is not interested, like the others, in the Nationalisation of Land and Capital as such, but only in the abolition of private property, which in any case is a nuisance, and which forces us to live for others. Wilde's ideal of isolationism is not clearly thought out, and the state he advocates is so overstated as to become basically unhuman. But he states a great truth when he says that: 'Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live'.³⁵³ It is indeed selfishness which demands uniformity, which the artist by his very nature must condemn, but it does not then follow that the greatest good results from pure

³⁵²Intentions, p. 326.

³⁵³Ibid. p. 328.

'unselfishness', from infinite variety, from anarchism.

Wilde does not denounce Materialism romantically, as an enemy to realisation:- 'They rage against Materialism, as they call it, forgetting that there has been no material improvement that has not spiritualised the world.'³⁵⁴ Indeed, in the Soul of Man he took perhaps an over-optimistic view of the benefits of machinery, looking forward to the day when machinery will be man's slave instead of the reverse, when all degrading and ugly toil is performed by machines leaving men free - but for what? Here is the flaw in his plan. According to it, the machines will produce what is useful, and the artists will produce what is beautiful. But there is no suggestion, as in Morris, that all men will be artists. Although he talks of the Individualism of all men, and their living 'flower-like lives', he gives no recipe for the flower-like life. It is the artist he is concerned with, and he makes strikingly little provision for the others, who must be supposed to be the mass of mankind. His Socialism, then, really covers only points raised by the problem of Individualism - because of it he will endure no authoritarian Socialism, no economic tyranny. Although as with all subjects on which he thought and wrote, he has given the Socialist cause much fuel, both for construction and criticism, his interest in Socialism appears to be strictly limited. Only in so far as he is an artist and in so far as artists must, to some greater or lesser extent live with others and obey laws, only thus far is he interested in Socialism, after his momentary enthusiasm waned.

³⁵⁴Intentions, p. 134.

It remains to study one question in particular which he deals with in The Soul of Man, the letters to the Daily Chronicle, and De Profundis. This is his personal attitude to the poor, to suffering and to pain. Of all things this was most changed by his imprisonment. He was always a very gentle and sensitive man, and this is part of the reason for his general instinctive revulsion from poor people living in degrading circumstances. Before his imprisonment, in The Soul of Man and elsewhere, he is over anxious to avoid sentimentality and excessive pity for the poor. He advocated the end of poverty and pain and disease in The Soul of Man, all as though by magic, by the power of the machine, but all with his eyes averted, and one can almost hear his sigh of relief. He was genuinely sympathetic but determinedly detached. And as soon as he left the subject he dismissed it, and chattered happily about the revival of the decorative arts 'in every home'.³⁵⁵

But when he himself had been in close contact with the poorest conditions and unable to forget those he pitied, his attitude became much more active. He wrote twice to the Daily Chronicle about treatment in prisons, and reform, and said in De Profundis: 'The prison system is utterly and entirely wrong. I would give anything to be able to alter it when I go out. I intend to try.'³⁵⁶ The letters are detailed, practical and forceful expressions of wrongs which required to be righted, in the interests of justice, not sentimentality. The letter of Prison Reform lists the worst

³⁵⁵Intentions, p. 321.

³⁵⁶Letters, p. 489.

conditions, and gives practical descriptions of how they can be alleviated. That on the case of Warder² Martin went still more forcefully into the personal aspect; the warder², the child and the lunatic were all lovingly described. He had not abandoned his old theoretic basis:- 'Wherever there is centralisation there is stupidity . . . Authority is as destructive to those who exercise it as it is to those on whom it is exercised.'³⁵⁷ But in De Profundis he realised the secret of suffering. 'There are times when sorrow seems to me to be the only truth . . . out of sorrow have the worlds been built, and at the birth of a child or a star there is pain.' In The Soul of Man he regretted that pain is the only door to self-perfection for non-artists; but in De Profundis he saw that only through sorrow can the soul reach its full perfection. 'Pleasure for the beautiful body, pain for the beautiful soul'.³⁵⁸ His attitude to Christ underwent a similar change, as he was initiated into the meaning of suffering so that he is able to move from the declaration in the Soul of Man that Individualism involves no claim by anyone on the individual, to the discovery of De Profundis: 'Whatever happens to another happens to oneself'.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁷Intentions, p. 294.

³⁵⁸Letters, p. 474.

³⁵⁹Ibid. p. 477.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Cast of Mind

It is only too possible when classifying the views of a writer such as Wilde into artistic, critical, religious and political categories to produce a quite false impression of compartmentalism and neatness. To prevent or correct this impression, I here insert a quick survey of his mind from quite another, almost arbitrary point of view. I wish to make a cross-section through the compartments by noticing an idiosyncrasy or foible that crops up repeatedly in his work and at first sight each instance seems to be a manifestation of the same idiosyncrasy. This is the phenomenon of repetition: Wilde repeated words of which he was especially fond, and in particular names; he lingered over the same phrase many times, and re-used epigrams continually; but he also dwelt continually on the same kind of theme, and constantly repeated a few favourite personal ideas which were almost superstitions. Repetitions of such varied kinds obviously are unlikely to be related to any one root cause, and an examination of the different reasons may show his mind more in the round, and reveal the complex human being in whom all the ideas originate.

It is a commonplace of literary criticism that the characters in Wilde's plays have no individuality, that they are merely a set of undifferentiated voices which utter witty, Wildean remarks. I do not intend to comment here on this view, but to investigate one

facet of the problem which may in part explain the origin of the criticism. One elementary way in which the characters are not completely differentiated is in their names. Wilde used the names of many characters again and again, and this in itself tends to blur the outlines of the figure that the name calls up in our minds. The names echo on from story to play, from play to play, always sounding familiar. But unless one is very careful, it is hard to separate them and discriminate between the various uses of each name.

My purpose in reviewing Wilde's use of proper names is to discover, as far as is possible, the significance of the repetitions. Was it indeed the merest casualness on Wilde's part? Was it that Wilde could not be bothered to think up new names for each new set of characters? Were the characters so unreal to him that it did not matter that each should have his own name? Was the Apostle of Beauty so fascinated by the sounds of some names that he had to keep them and use them again and again? Or was he pleased with them, in the same way that he was fascinated by his own favourite paradoxes and epigrams, which appeared again and again in his conversation, and in work after work? Did he bridge the gap between art and life by borrowing names from his acquaintance, or was he careful to keep his fictional characters superior and more delightful, by keeping them away from the sphere of life?

In surveying the Works with a view to classifying the names Wilde uses, it is best to separate the early plays, Vera: or the Nihilists (published 1880), and The Duchess of Padua (published 1883):

and also Salome (published 1893), and A Florentine Tragedy (of which we have only an unfinished version). The reason is obvious; the names of the characters in these plays are all foreign, or, in the case of Salome, Biblical, and thus there is very little connection between them and the names used in other works. But even here, the two early plays are used as material to be plundered by the author for the sake of later work. The young Russian revolutionary in Lord Arthur Savile's Crime, (published 1887), Count Rouvaloff, takes his name from another Count Rouvaloff, in Vera, and two of the three characters in A Florentine Tragedy, Simone and Guido Bardi, derive from characters in The Duchess of Padua, from Simone Gesso, the Duke, and from Taddeo Bardi and Guido Ferranti. Such uses appear entirely natural, and in themselves unremarkable. Any writer anxious to avoid waste or causing himself any trouble might do the same.

Another set of works easily excluded from this study is the Tales, both those published in The Happy Prince and Other Tales (1888), and those on A House of Pomegranates (1891). Like the fairy tales of the brothers Grimm and those of Hans Andersen, both in popular editions in the 1880's, Wilde's fairy tales generally dispense with names for the characters. Only two tales break this rule. In The Birthday of the Infanta, names are used to give an impression of exotic foreignness, an atmosphere of Spain:- Don Pedro de Aragon, the Duchess of Albuquerque, the Marquess de Las-Torres. Even the title was altered to enhance the Spanish background. The original title was 'The Birthday of the Little Princess' (Paris Illustré,

March 30, 1889.). In The Devoted Friend, two characters, little Hans and Hugh the Miller, are named in true Andersen style. But throughout the rest of the Tales the characters are referred to as 'the king', 'the witch', 'the priest', 'the woodcutter', 'the beggarwomen', 'the swallow', 'a girl', 'the bird', or, occasionally, as personifications such as 'Death' and 'Avarice'.

The majority of the essays and lectures, the De Profundis and the Poems also dispense entirely with fictional proper names, and are thus outside the scope of this investigation.

We are left with the critical essays in dialogue form, the four Society comedies, Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories, The Portrait of Mr. W.H., and The Picture of Dorian Gray. In these works, then, we shall endeavour to discover if Wilde was over-casual in his use both of prenames and surnames. Excluding the fact that members of the same family naturally bear the same name, we find that no fewer than forty-nine names are used twice or more in these works, and of these forty-nine names, sixteen are used three times or more. Besides this, there are also many names which appear to have been invented by slightly altering names the author has used already. An example of this would appear to be the family name of Lord Illingworth in A Woman of No Importance, (1893) - Harford, and the similar name given to Lady Jame Barford, who flits through An Ideal Husband (1895). (Neither of these names appears in a Who's Who of the period:- Wilde invented aristocratic sounding

names with an unfailingly accurate ear. In a sense, Wilde invented these names, not for any obvious utilitarian reason, not for comic or allegorical effect. His names are more real, more aristocratic than the majority we find in Who's Who. His are the names which ought to be in Who's Who.)

Similarly, in The Picture of Dorian Gray we have mention of Lady Branksome, and in both A Woman of No Importance and An Ideal Husband we have the name Brancaster, apparently a development of Branksome. Further, in an early version of The Importance of Being Earnest, we find that the dowager later named Lady Bracknell was originally called Lady Brancaster.³⁶⁰ We find Lord Bilton in The Canterville Ghost, (1887), Lord and Lady Belton in A Woman of No Importance, (1893), and the Duchess of Bolton in The Importance of Being Earnest, (1895).

But even the figure of forty-nine names used at least twice is misleading until we realise how many characters Wilde gracefully alludes to in these plays and stories, besides the actual participants - the total number of named characters is two hundred and twenty-three. Another surprising figure is the number of titled persons - one hundred and twenty-seven of the two hundred and twenty-three. This includes four Dukes, eight Duchesses, one Earl, one Countess, forty Lords, forty-nine Ladies, twelve Baronets or Knights, and twelve 'Other Ranks'. The critical commonplace of Wilde's attraction to the aristocracy would appear to have a certain amount of foundation!

³⁶⁰ Bracknell, so similar in sound, was doubtless suggested by Lady Queensberry's country address, The Hut, near Bracknell, Berkshire.

Many of Wilde's characters, as is well known, are named after the place where he conceived the works, - Lady Windermere, Jack Worthing, Lord Goring, etc. Many other of his titled characters are casually but unerringly named from towns - Lady Jedburgh, the Duchess of Berwick, Lady Agatha Carlisle, the Duchess of Paisley, Lady Bracknell, etc. They 'have always a cachet of distinction: they fall on the ear full of toned with secular dignity', he explained to Frank Harris.³⁶¹ He singled out 'Windermere' and 'Hunstanton' as examples of the 'exquisitely beautiful names' of English villages, and 'rolled the syllables over his tongue with a soft sensual pleasure'. And indeed it seems to be a combination of distinction and sonority that appealed to Wilde: this is attested to by Yeats:-

'Did you ever hear him say "Marquess of Dimmesdale"?'
a friend of his once asked me. 'He does not say
"the Duke of York" with any great pleasure.'³⁶²

In his exhaustive analysis of Wilde's language, Ojala stresses the fascination that the human voice had for Wilde: 'The voice is one of the most frequently mentioned words pertaining to the human being'.³⁶³ In a letter of 1889, Wilde wrote:

What a pretty name you have! it is worthy of fiction. Would you mind if I wrote a book called The Story of Aubrey Richardson? I won't, but I should like to. There is music in its long syllables, and a memory of romance, and a suggestion of wonder. Names fascinate me terribly.³⁶⁴

³⁶¹Oscar Wilde, pp. 100 - 101.

³⁶²The Trembling of the Veil, 1922, p. 28.

³⁶³Ojala, Part II, p. 110.

³⁶⁴Letters, p. 252.

It is clear that Wilde's love of beautiful names is in many ways merely a facet of his general love of words, both of their sounds and of their associations.

Mr. Wilde's delight in words for their own sake is quite Rabelaisian. He loves to speak them in heaps, like a child bathing its hands in rich, many coloured beads.³⁶⁵

'He was the typical literary temperament to whom words are realities and the sound of a sentence in itself convincing.'³⁶⁶ But the special, almost superstitious importance Wilde sometimes attached to names is shown in Dorian Gray where Basil says:

When I like people immensely I never tell their names to anyone. It is like surrendering a part of them.³⁶⁷

In the main, then, it seems that the repetition of names is a consequence of Wilde's delight in their sounds and general effect. But in some cases the repetition is surely due to carelessness: the crowning example of this, carelessness so great as to make no sense at all, is the very first scene of An Ideal Husband. In the first line, the 'exquisitely fragile' Mrs. Marchmont calls Lady Basildon 'Margaret'. Within twenty lines, Lady Basildon calls Mrs. Marchmont 'Margaret' and Mrs. Marchmont calls Lady Basildon 'Olivia'.

A question we must ask sooner or later about Wilde's use of names is this: did Wilde use the names of people he knew in his

³⁶⁵ Richard Le Gallienne's review of Dorian Gray, The Academy, July 4, 1891.

³⁶⁶ Self Portrait; taken from the letters and journals of Charles Ricketts, 1939, p. 425.

³⁶⁷ Dorian Gray, p. 6.

books? Do the prenames and surnames of his family and friends figure in his works? The reader's immediate answer is in the negative, and his opinion is borne out by a thorough investigation. The instances where he does this are sufficiently outstanding as to be the exception that proves the rule. None of his family appear, except that his sons' names, Cyril and Vivian, are given to the two characters in the dialogue The Decay of Lying. None of his well known friends appears by name, though a man Wilde is known to have disliked, John Lane the publisher, is known to be caricatured as Lane, Algernon Moncrieffe's manservant in The Importance of Being Earnest. The only other possibility of a name related to one of Wilde's friends is that there may be a gentle joke on Lord Alfred Douglas in A Woman of No Importance, where a languid character called Lord Alfred Rufford utters three short speeches about his gold-tipped cigarettes and his debts. On the whole Wilde seems to have followed his own precept: 'The only real people are the people who never existed.'³⁶⁸

It remains to study the names which most of all Wilde repeats and lingers over. We have found for many of his repetitions the expected reasons of convenience, carelessness or appropriateness. A combination of all three probably explains Lady Stutfield (Canterville Ghost), Lady Stutfield (Lady Windermere's Fan) - and Lady Stutfield (A Woman of No Importance). But a certain number of names cannot easily be disposed of. These names appear to have

³⁶⁸Intentions, p. 14.

some quality which attracted Wilde irresistably.³⁶⁹ If they are tabulated, not according to the work in which they appear, but by the names which are repeated, we will notice the repetitions even more strongly.

Here are five of the most striking examples.

1. Erskine. Used four times.

Erskine's Toxicology (Lord Arthur Savile's Crime)

Hughie Erskine (Model Millionaire)

Erskine (Mr. W.H.)

Mr. Erskine of Treadley (Dorian Gray)

2. Erlynne. Used twice.

Mrs. Erlynne (Dorian Gray)

Mrs. Erlynne (Lady Windermere's Fan.)

3. Windermere. Used twice.

Lady Windermere (Lord Arthur Savile's Crime)

Lord and Lady Windermere (Lady Windermere's Fan)

4. Ernest. Used four times.

Ernest Harrowden (Dorian Gray)

Ernest (Critic as Artist)

Ernest Allonby (A Woman of No Importance)

Ernest Worthing (Importance of Being Earnest - used for four different characters.)

5. Merton. Used six times.

Sybil Merton, Lady Julia Merton and Mr. Merton
(Lord Arthur Savile's Crime.)

Laura Merton (Model Millionaire)

Edward Merton (Mr. W.H.)

³⁶⁹Cf. Ojala, Part II, pp. 22 - 23.

Hetty Mertom (Dorian Gray)

Lady Merton (Lady Windermere's Fan)

Lord Merton (An Ideal Husband)

No other names are used so often, and these names can soon be seen to be to some extent phonetically similar. The syllable 'er' occurs in each of these names; it appears that Wilde, who liked to compose out loud, had certain favourite sounds or types of sounds, of which this was the most outstanding. It corresponds to the often repeated use of 'silver' in his poems. In a more general way he enjoyed long vowel sounds, often followed by the letter 'r', for the aesthetic pleasure they give the ear. Thus he uses Arthur (five times), Berkshire, Bernstein, Berwick (twice), Chiltern (three times), Darlington (twice), Fermor (twice), Gerald (twice), Harbury, Harford (three times), Harley, Horton, Jerningham, Merriman, Perth, Percy and Worsley.

But aesthetic appreciation cannot explain other of Wilde's repetitions. To single out his repetition of names is merely to spotlight one aspect of a general tendency. Wilde is often curiously standstill, even over many years, which is very possibly a sign of laziness. He repeats not only names but epigrams and paradoxes very frequently. For example, in Vera (1880), Prince Paul remarks:-

Experience, the name men give to their mistakes.
I never commit any.

In Dorian Gray (1890), Lord Henry mused that:-

Experience was of no ethical value. It was merely
the name men gave to their mistakes.

And in Lady Windermere's Fan (1892):-

Cecil Graham: Experience is a question of instinct about life. I have got it. Tuppy hasn't. Experience is the name Tuppy gives to his mistakes. That is all.

Dumby: Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes.

There are also much more extended repetitions, of which we will consider one example. There is a snatch of conversation on America in The Canterville Ghost (1887):

"I don't think I should like America."
 "I suppose because we have no ruins and no curiosities," said Virginia satirically.
 "No ruins! no curiosities!" answered the Ghost;
 "You have your navy and your manners."

America also forms a subject of conversation in The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890):

"I am told, on excellent authority, that her father keeps an American dry-goods store," said Sir Thomas Brandon, looking supercilious.
 "My uncle has already suggested porkpacking, Sir Thomas."
 "Dry-goods? What are American dry-goods?" asked the Duchess, raising her large hands in wonder, and accentuating the verb.
 "American novels," answered Lord Henry, helping himself to some quail.
 The Duchess looked puzzled . . .
 "I wish to goodness it had never been discovered at all!" she exclaimed. "Really, our girls have no chance nowadays. It is most unfair."
 "Perhaps after all, America never has been discovered," said Mr. Erskine. "I myself would say that it had merely been detected."
 "Oh! but I have seen specimens of the inhabitants," answered the Duchess, vaguely. "I must confess that most of them are extremely pretty. And they dress well too. They get all their dresses in Paris. I wish I could afford to do the same."
 "They say that when good Americans die they go to Paris," chuckled Sir Thomas, who had a large wardrobe of Humour's cast-off clothes.

"Really! And where do bad Americans go to when they die?" inquired the Duchess.

"They go to America," murmured Lord Henry.

In A Woman of No Importance (1893), Wilde re-uses both of these conversations almost word for word:-

Lady Hunstanton: Miss Worsley, Caroline, is an orphan. Her father was a very wealthy millionaire or philanthropist, or both, I believe, who entertained my son quite hospitably, when he visited Boston. I don't know how he made his money originally.

Kelvil: I fancy in American dry-goods.

Lady Hunstanton: What are American dry-goods?

Lord Illingworth: American novels.

Lady Hunstanton: How very singular! . . . Well, from whatever source her large fortune came, I have a great esteem for Miss Worsley. She dresses exceedingly well. All Americans do dress well. They get their clothes in Paris.

Mrs. Allonby: They say, Lady Hunstanton, that when good Americans die they go to Paris.

Lady Hunstanton: Indeed! And when bad Americans die, where do they go to?

Lord Illingworth: Oh, they go to America.

And in Act 2:-

Lady Caroline: There are a great many things you haven't got in America, I am told, Miss Worsley. They say you have no ruins and no curiosities.

Mrs. Allonby
(to Lady Stutfield):

What nonsense! They have their mothers and their manners.

Hester: The English aristocracy supply us with our curiosities, Lady Caroline. They are sent over to us every summer, regularly, in the steamers, and propose to us the day after they land. As for ruins, we are trying to build up something that will last longer than brick or stone.

We have ample evidence, too, that Wilde loved to polish his epigrams and paradoxes round the dinner table, before committing them to paper

at all. Wilde always enjoyed, in his own words, 'the pleasure of quoting myself'.³⁷⁰ Perhaps he would have said that this constant enthusiastic repetition indicated true appreciation.

But there is a far less obvious kind of repetition in Wilde's work, the recurrence of certain ideas that are found again and again, ideas that seem to have a special interest for Wilde. We will look at two of them in detail. First, there is an idea based on Wilde's belief that art is superior to life, or at least on his persistent consciousness of the connexions between the two. We find it in *Dorian Gray*, in the story of *Sybil Vane*. *Sybil* is a wonderful actress, whose performances as *Juliet* and *Shakespeare's* other young heroines bewitch *Dorian* completely, and he falls in love with her. But when he brings his friends to see her, her acting is appalling. Afterwards, she explains to *Dorian* that when she acted before, she simulated emotions she did not understand: now that she knows what it is to love, she cannot act it.

Two of the Poems in Prose echo this idea. One, The Actress,³⁷¹ probably the nucleus for the story of *Sybil Vane*, is the story of a great actress who gives up her career for a man she loves more, so much in fact that acting becomes meaningless for her. Then she finds that he ceases to love her, and that she can no longer use her art. The other, The Poet,³⁷² is the story of a man who

³⁷⁰Intentions, p. 55.

³⁷¹Vyvyan Holland, Son of Oscar Wilde, 1954, Appendix C p. 258 ff.

³⁷²Ibid. pp. 257 - 258.

described wonderful things that he imagined as if he had really seen them, so that he held his audience spell-bound. One day he actually saw the magical things he had described; he could no longer invent, and his faculty of telling marvellous tales was lost. This idea is summed up in an epigram from the Critic as Artist: 'Whatever actually occurs is spoiled for art.'³⁷³ It is a thread that in varying forms runs through very many of his works: the curious and persistent idea that life can ruin the imagination, and experience vitiate the poet's talent. It is a major theme of The Decay of Lying.³⁷⁴ It reinforces his worship of youth, for the young are more likely to be untouched by life, and full of imagination.

Many a young man starts in life with a natural gift for exaggeration which, if nurtured in congenial and sympathetic surroundings, or by the imitation of the best models, might grow into something really great and wonderful. But, as a rule, he comes to nothing. He either falls into careless habits of accuracy, or takes to frequenting the society of the aged and well-informed. Both things are equally fatal to his imagination . . . and in a short time he develops a morbid and unhealthy faculty of truth-telling.³⁷⁵

Thus the theme becomes related to Wilde's distinction between truth and fact, truth being something imaginatively conceived, while fact is a lifeless thing. The theme is very often connected with speech and the power of the word; in Dorian Gray as we have seen

³⁷³Intentions, p. 207.

³⁷⁴See especially pp. 14, 21, 26 - 27.

³⁷⁵Intentions, pp. 9 - 10.

Basil Hallward did not want to tell the name of the youth he loved - he felt it was like surrendering a part of them.³⁷⁶ When he made his confession of love to Dorian he said:- 'Something seems to have gone out of me. Perhaps one should never put one's worship into words.' Wilde had a belief that his life and art were strongly connected, that the latter determined the former; we can see it in De Profundis, when he shows how his works pre-figured his fate:

Of course all this is fore-shadowed and pre-figured in my art. Some of it is in "The Happy Prince": some of it in "The Young King", notably in the passage where the Bishop says to the kneeling boy, "Is not He who made misery wiser than thou art?" a phrase which when I wrote it seemed to me little more than a phrase: a great deal of it is hidden away in the note of Doom that like a purple thread runs through the gold cloth of Dorian Gray: in "The Critic as Artist" it is set forth in many colours: in The Soul of Man it is written down simply and in letters too easy to read: it is one of the refrains whose recurrent motifs make Salome so like a piece of music and bind it together as a ballad: in the prose-poem of the man who from the bronze of the image of the "Pleasure that liveth for a Moment" has to make the image of the "Sorrow that abideth for Ever" it is incarnate. It could not have been otherwise. At every single moment of one's life one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been.³⁷⁷

Sherard reports that when asked why he did not write after he left prison, Wilde replied:

Because I have written all there was to write. I wrote when I did not know life; now that I do know the meaning of life, I have no more to write; life cannot be written, life can only be lived. I have lived.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁶Dorian Gray, p. 6.

³⁷⁷Letters, pp. 475 - 476.

³⁷⁸The Real Oscar Wilde: p. 98.

The other curious, even more recurrent idea also has a great bearing on language, the virtue and power of the word. It is the theme of an essay, a play and a poem in prose. The plot of The Portrait of Mr. W.H. depends on the theme that if you convert someone to your faith you lose it yourself: it is intricately worked out. Cyril Graham forms his theory of the sonnets and dies to prove its truth to Erskine, since forgery did not suffice: Erskine convinces the narrator and ceases to believe himself: the narrator re-examines the case, furnishes it with additional proofs and presents it to Erskine enthusiastically, and loses his own faith: but he has re-convinced Erskine, who in turn simulates martyrdom for the idea, although he does not wholly succeed in convincing the narrator.

More simply, the theme runs through the fragment La Sainte Courtisane, a tale adapted in its germ from Anatole France's Thais. The hermit tries to convert the courtesan: at length he succeeds, but falls to evil ways himself: the courtesan tries to tempt the hermit and instead becomes converted to his hol[?] life. Perhaps the very symmetry of this appealed to Wilde, but it is not the only occurrence of the theme. The Teacher of Wisdom is a poem in prose on a similar subject. A holy man has great knowledge of God, and spends his life teaching, but finds his knowledge and faith grow less the more he gives them to others, so resolves to treasure the remnant of his knowledge and not to impart it to anyone. At length compassion makes him reveal it to a young robber, but he is consoled

by the love of God. In Dorian Gray³⁷⁹ Lord Henry teaches that all influence is immoral: to influence a person is to give him your own soul. Again Wilde sums up the idea in his critical dialogues: 'When people agree with me I always feel I must be wrong'.³⁸⁰ And again: 'To arrive at what one really believes one must speak through lips different from one's own'.

Both of these recurrent ideas relate to basic questions in Wilde's thought. The first concerns the relation of life and art; naturally, it recurs in Wilde's writings because in many ways they are devoted to examining the relation between life and art, with special reference to Wilde's artistic philosophy. The problem is whether the aesthete should live for beauty alone, disregarding every other consideration, and whether this is possible. The Tales seem to indicate that Wilde concluded that this was neither valid nor ultimately possible. Should the aesthete make life into an art? What are the particular difficulties in shaping the formless materials or life into an art? These questions Wilde also investigated, and found some of the difficulties in Dorian Gray and the comedies. The other theme, concerned with belief, is a characteristic preoccupation, for Wilde had to prove at least to his own satisfaction that belief was arbitrary, if his idea that 'mind is motion in the intellectual sphere' was to stand.

His attempts to solve the relations of life and art led to a concentration of themes: as perceptive critics have pointed out,³⁸¹ Wilde's themes are limited - they too recur and are repeated. But

³⁷⁹P. 27.

³⁸⁰Intentions, p. 213. Cf. Lady Windermere's Fan, p. 128.

³⁸¹Ojala, I, 133, and Merle, pp. 345 ff.

it is not a limit that spoils his art, for these few themes are basic human ones, love, death, sin, suffering, man and God. The aspect that most constantly reappears is the motif of sin and reparation, often with reference to the Tannhäuser story,³⁸² punishment for sin by being made an outcast and going through a period of ordeal before finding forgiveness. This theme figures in the Tales, especially in The Star-Child, but also in The Selfish Giant, The Young King, and The Fisherman and his Soul. It is a basic theme of the less serious story The Canterville Ghost, and strangely enough, it forms the plot-theme of each of the comedies except Earnest. Lady Windermere's Fan is the story of a woman, Mrs. Erlynne, who has sinned and has been made an outcast, and who is eventually willing to sacrifice herself for her daughter's happiness. A Woman of No Importance is the tale of Mrs. Arbuthnot, also ostracised by society and by her own shame for having borne an illegitimate child: her trial ends, and she finds happiness. An Ideal Husband centres on a secret sin in the early life of Sir Robert Chiltern.

Ojala writes: 'All these themes may perhaps be reduced to one common, great, underlying theme: to a sense of one's own guilt.'³⁸³ This may be one reason for the tremendously frequent appearance in Wilde's work of the motif of the mask, for the posing and the attitudes. Wilde insists that a man will not speak truth

³⁸²Ojala, I, 132 - 133.

³⁸³Ibid. I, 132.

in his own voice:- 'Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth'.³⁸⁴
 He shows an almost morbid fascination for the idea of the mask -
 only when we assemble his references do we realise how frequently
 they occur.

In The Duchess of Padua, the Duke advises Guido:

yet see you show
 A smiling mask of friendship to all men
 Until you have them safely in your grip
 Then you can crush them.

Mrs. Erlynne in Lady Windermere's Fan describes the state of being
 outcast:- 'Afraid every moment lest the mask should be stripped
 from one's face', and such phrases as 'sin in its painted mask',³⁸⁵
 'the mask of his shame',³⁸⁶ 'a placid mask of servility',³⁸⁷ and
 'a white mask of horror',³⁸⁸ are commonplace. Wilde called his
 essay of Shakespearean costumes The Truth of Masks - masks here of
 course are identified with art, and the idea is similar to that in
The Decay of Lying where artifice is superior to Nature.

In point of fact what is interesting about people
 in good society . . . is the mask that each one of
 them wears, not the reality that lies behind the
 mask.³⁸⁹

The Canterville Ghost, in lighter vein, delights in dressing up
 and assuming different terrible disguises, each with its appropriate
 mask. Gide comments:- 'Wilde made up his mind to make of falsehood

³⁸⁴Intentions, p. 191.

³⁸⁵Miscellanies, p. 239.

³⁸⁶Dorian Gray, p. 151.

³⁸⁷Ibid. p. 189.

³⁸⁸Lord Arthur Savile's Crime, p. 14.

³⁸⁹Intentions, p. 15.

a work of art',³⁹⁰ and asserts that his art in general had 'something of the mask about it'. In The Decay of Lying Wilde claimed that art created new forms of life: 'She clothed her children in strange raiment and gave them masks'.³⁹¹

The motif of the Sphinx is often used in similar ways: there is the short story The Sphinx Without a Secret, describing the woman who loved mystery so much that as she had no secrets she had to pose and assume a mask of secrecy. The Sphinx has an inscrutable mask-like face, which inspires the strange imaginings of the poem of that name, and it is a mask which is coveted although often disappointing. The former theme recurs in A Woman of No Importance:³⁹² "Describe us as a sex." - "Sphinxes without secrets." In The Decay of Lying, the image is somewhat different:-

The solid stolid British intellect lies in the desert sands like the Sphinx in Flaubert's marvellous tale, and fantasy, La Chimère, dances round it, and calls to it with her false, flute-toned voice.³⁹³

The motifs of mask and Sphinx have a considerable importance, but before examining it we will note one other recurrent motif, the description of the little statuettes of dancing girls found at Tanagra. Sybil Merton 'looked like one of those delicate little figures men find in the olive-woods near Tanagra'.³⁹⁴ This comparison had a strange fascination for Wilde.

³⁹⁰A. Gide, Oscar Wilde, 1951, pp. 92 - 93.

³⁹¹Intentions, p. 23. See also Ibid. p. 66, Letters, pp. 488, 492.

³⁹²Pp. 38 - 39.

³⁹³Intentions, p. 53.

³⁹⁴Lord Arthur Savile's Crime, p. 26.

And we find them still in the dusty tombs on
the yellow hillside by Tanagra, with the faint
gold and the fading crimson still lingering about
hair and lips and raiment.³⁹⁵

The 'delicate little figurines of Tanagra'³⁹⁶ figure in many of
his works,³⁹⁷ - and his devotion to them appears to have influenced
Lord Alfred Douglas, who thus describes his mother in his

Autobiography:

She had angels' beauty, a gentle, sad, proud,
tiny, flowerlike face and head with a slim figure
like a Tanagra statuette.³⁹⁸

The basic attraction of the figurines appears to be their grace and
delicacy, and the attitude - the dancing girl. This brings us to
a new question, the position of Wilde in the Romantic tradition.
Professor Kermode in Romantic Image has given a splendid analysis
of the romantic situation in the latter days especially, and the
images used to express it, with particular reference to Yeats.
It is useful to place Wilde more fully in this tradition.

Kermode describes the situation of the romantic artist as
isolation, estrangement from life and action. He is essentially
contemplative. But because it derives from Blake, it is more
than this. Blake, as has recently been shown very clearly,³⁹⁹
stood in a tradition which derived from the Renaissance - a tradition

³⁹⁵Intentions, p. 110.

³⁹⁶Reviews, p. 44.

³⁹⁷Cf. Dorian Gray, p. 120, Ideal Husband, p. 5, Miscellanies, p. 40,
Reviews, p. 144.

³⁹⁸The Autobiography of Lord Alfred Douglas, New edition, 1931, p. 10.

³⁹⁹See Hidden Riches: Traditional Symbolism from the Renaissance
to Blake, by Desiree Hirst, 1964.

of symbolism

which, in the hands of masters, like Ficino, Paracelsus and Dürer, combined elements of Neo-Platonism, alchemy, hermeticism and the cabalist tradition - a tradition which involved magic, and a vision which is as much more than reason as Wilde's 'truth' is more than facts. It is a vision which the genius has to a higher and deeper degree than other men, and he suffers for it in melancholy and estrangement. The 'four-fold vision', to use Blake's comparison, is the gift which separates the artist from other men, who tend towards 'one-fold vision and Newton's sleep'.⁴⁰⁰ Kermode traces the idea especially in Keats' Hyperion, where Moneta is the Image who gives this knowledge, and the cost is very high: Moneta is an image of death in life. In Empedocles on Etna also he shows the fundamental statement of the poet's predicament, where the poet who has achieved the fullest knowledge is quite isolated and can only escape into action in the form of self-destruction. The poet is seen as guarding his art against 'the universe of death, the world of reason'.⁴⁰¹

The tradition to Wilde is alive - so alive that it is inseparable from his thought: he thinks and lives it.

When the outcast counts on being crucified,
indeed savours the prospect; when, bitter and
gay, he abstains from morality for fear, as Yeats
put it in a late letter, of losing the indispensable
'heroic ecstasy', then we know we are dealing with
a tradition which has become fully, not to say
histrionically, self-conscious.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰⁰ Complete Writings of William Blake: ed. Keynes, 1925, p. 818.

⁴⁰¹ Frank Kermode, Romantic Image, 1957, p. 25.

⁴⁰² Ibid. p. 22.

Wilde himself claimed more than once: 'I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age'.⁴⁰³ He believed that his 'crucifixion' was implicit from the first and foreshadowed in his works.⁴⁰⁴ It was inevitable:

The gods are strange. It is not of our vices only they make instruments to scourge us. They bring us to ruin through what in us is good, gentle, humane, loving. But for my pity and affection for you and yours, I would not now be weeping in this terrible place. Of course I discern in all our relations, not Destiny merely, but Doom: Doom that walks always swiftly, because she goes to the shedding of blood.⁴⁰⁵

Wilde almost selfconsciously 'fits' the romantic pattern; each characteristic that Kermode isolates is to be found in him. He shares in the love of art, 'the work of imagination which relegates "real" life to a position of minor importance'.⁴⁰⁶ So he wrote:

A steady course of Balzac reduces our living friends to shadows, and our acquaintances to the shadows of shades . . . One of the greatest tragedies of my life is the death of Lucien de Rubempré. It is a grief from which I have never been able completely to rid myself. It haunts me in my moments of pleasure.⁴⁰⁷

If we read Kermode's account of the Romantic idea of art, it reads like a condensed summary of Wilde's opinions as examined in Chapter 2.

The work of art itself is symbol, 'aesthetic monad'; utterly original and not in the old sense 'imitated'; 'concrete', yet fluid and

⁴⁰³Letters, pp. 466, 473.

⁴⁰⁴See above, p. 141.

⁴⁰⁵Letters, p. 440: see also pp. 444, 466, 481, 506.

⁴⁰⁶Kermode, p. 90.

⁴⁰⁷Intentions, p. 18.

suggestive; a means to truth, a truth unrelated to, and more exalted than, that of positivist science, or any observation depending upon the discursive reason; out of the flux of life, and therefore, under one aspect, dead; yet uniquely alive because of its participation in a higher order of existence; and because it is analogous not to a machine but to an organism; coextensive in matter and form; resistant to explication; largely independent of intention, and of any form of ethical utility; and itself emblematised in certain recurring images, of which . . . the Dancer is the most perfect.⁴⁰⁸

The 'vision' depends on the inseparable fusion of spirit and matter:⁴⁰⁹ Wilde gives his own version of the credo:

What the artist is always looking for is that mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward: in which Form reveals. Of such modes of existence there are not a few . . . Music, in which all subject is absorbed in expression and cannot be separated from it, is a complex example, and a flower or a child a simple example of what I mean: but Sorrow is the ultimate example both in life and Art . . . Truth in Art is not any correspondence between the essential idea and the accidental existence; it is not the resemblance of shape to shadow, or of the form mirrored in the crystal to the form itself: it is no Echo coming from a hollow hill, any more than it is the well of silver water in the valley that shows the Moon to the Moon and Narcissus to Narcissus. Truth in Art is the unity of a thing with itself: the outward rendered expressive of the inward: the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with spirit.⁴¹⁰

Kermode, indeed, admits that in such theories 'Wilde concentrates the nineteenth century for the benefit of the twentieth.'⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁸ Kermode, p. 44.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid. p. 21.

⁴¹⁰ Letters, p. 473.

⁴¹¹ Kermode, p. 46.

The position of the artist is summed up in the search for the symbol or image by which he can express his vision, not intellectually but in this fusion of spirit and matter, form and substance, body and soul. 'All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.'⁴¹² The images which have most often expressed it are those of the dead face (and the mask), and of the dancer, with both of which Wilde is intensely pre-occupied. The enigma of the Sphinx, the marble goddess Charmides loved, and Charmides' corpse which the nymph loved are examples: the figure of Salome and the Tanagra statuettes are also typical pre-occupations. Dancing is an important feature of the fairy tales, from the grotesque dance of the dwarf for the Infants' birthday to the dance of the Fisherman with the Witch in The Fisherman and His Soul. In the same story, the Soul tempts the Fisherman to leave his love in search of a veiled dancing girl with naked feet. Wilde was intensely aware of the tradition which came to him from Keats, Flaubert and Pater, the three writers whose influence he admitted. From Flaubert especially he took the image of the Sphinx. The 'cult of the dead face'⁴¹³ that Pater began and Yeats took up is touched on in The Truth of Masks:

On opening the coffer they found within its marble womb the body of a beautiful girl of about fifteen years of age, preserved by the embalmer's skill from corruption and the decay of time. Her eyes were

⁴¹²Preface to *D.G.*

⁴¹³Kermode, p. 64.

half open, her hair rippled round her in crisp curling gold, and from her lips and cheek the bloom of maidenhood had not yet departed. Borne back to the Capitol, she became at once the centre of a new cult . . . ⁴¹⁴

Lord Henry Wotton declares: 'But beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins', a very similar idea to Yeats' 'Dancer' image. ⁴¹⁵

Wilde was intensely conscious of the need for the image:

To convey ideas through the medium of images has always been the aim of those who are artists as well as thinkers in literature. ⁴¹⁶

But perhaps he was too self-conscious to realise fully the images he used. His mind dealt naturally in images, and he developed this faculty when he began to talk in parables:

They believe that all thoughts are born naked. They don't understand that I cannot think otherwise than in stories. The sculptor doesn't try to translate his thoughts into marble; he thinks in marble directly. ⁴¹⁷

When we have placed Wilde, with allowance for his individuality, in the Romantic tradition, it is time to approach his creative work. Wilde created because he needed an audience, and because he wished to create fine forms in art. This dual need is illustrated in all his imaginative works, the second by a preoccupation with style form and perfection. The first need is illustrated by the way in which all his artistic works attack the problems of art and life,

⁴¹⁴Intentions, p. 242.

⁴¹⁵Dorian Gray, p. 4.

⁴¹⁶Reviews, p. 172.

⁴¹⁷A. Gide, Oscar Wilde, p. 27.

or of the artistic life. The two very different styles often prominent in his work coincide with two different approaches to the problem: in the Tales and the Lyrical drama, the ornate, decorated style corresponds to a symbolical exploration in a world remote from that of every day; in Dorian Gray and the comedies, the sharply critical yet witty and epigrammatic style examines the assumptions of the everyday world and the relations between that world and the aesthete.

Wilde's first instinctive reaction to his world was an abrupt and basic revolt against the manners and tepid morals of Victorian society, and a longing for different values. These values were based on Individualism and love of beauty, a beauty which writers such as Baudelaire and Flaubert had shown was to be found in many things Victorian society considered wicked and immoral. In his critical writings he achieved a position of independence from which to contemplate or criticise life and art, although there are signs of uneasiness in his religious and political thought. In his imaginative work he tried to extend this intellectual independence to the independence of the whole man, in relation to life and art. Dorian Gray is a complex attempt to investigate both the social and the inner or spiritual relations of the aesthete with life, and so there is a certain dichotomy in Dorian Gray, a light and dark side. In his other works he tended to concentrate on one side at a time, on the spiritual in the Lyrical drama, the Tales, the Poems in prose and some of the poems, and on the social side in the comedies.

This is not to say that the comedies are more superficial; they deal with the aesthete's relations with others, as the tales for example deal with his strivings with his own soul. This problem must be borne in mind in our analysis of the works, along with more general artistic questions.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Picture of Dorian Gray

When we consider Wilde's imaginative work in the light of his critical theory, it is difficult to know whether The Picture of Dorian Gray ranks more as imaginative work or as critical theory - it is a strange combination, what Ojala has called 'the chef-d'oeuvre of Wilde's decadence'.⁴¹⁸ So we will consider it centrally, both as an expression of his theories at their most extreme, and as a work of art written, as far as he was able, in accordance with his artistic ideals. Dorian Gray gives particular opportunities to observe Wilde's theories in action, because he revised it so thoroughly. The original version, published in full in Lippincott's Monthly Magazine, July 1890, is already a typical product of his ideas and his style: but the revision for publication in book form left scarcely one page unscathed, and added six chapters which entirely altered the structure of the novel. It will be interesting to see what kinds of alteration he then made.

But first, as usual we have to examine the combined evidence of the critics as to the sources of Dorian Gray. The authors cited include Huysmans, Pater, Balzac, Poe, Stevenson, Maturin, Disraeli, Zola, Gautier, de Musset, Goethe, Flaubert and miscellaneous French writers. If each of these had any considerable influence, it would be hard to say that Wilde gave much to the novel himself.

⁴¹⁸Ojala, I, 204.

In fact, the very number of influences cited seems to imply that Wilde is not copying but writing in a well-established tradition, or combining two well-defined genres. As to plot, the general idea of a talisman, often a portrait, which costs the soul of the owner and charts its progress, is certainly not new. The pact with the devil appears as a key-plot in Faust, Poe's The Oval Portrait, Balzac's Peau de Chagrin and the work of Wilde's distant kinsman, Charles Maturin, Melmoth the Wanderer. As Ojala points out,⁴¹⁹ the book might be said to derive its plot from such as these and its atmosphere from novels of the decadence, such as Gautier's Mademoiselle de Maupin, Huysmans' A Rebours and Pater's Marius the Epicurean. Other, less important influences are easily admitted, such as Lefébure's book on lace which furnished descriptive material for Chapter XI, and the description of Hamilcay's treasure in that chapter, which derives from Flaubert's Salammbô.⁴²⁰

Hartley says that though the theme of a bargain with the devil is very old, the immediate forerunners of Wilde's story are Poe in William Wilson and The Oval Portrait, and Balzac in Peau de Chagrin. Taking evidence from Wilde's other works, he favours Balzac as immediate influence, because Wilde often refers to Balzac but nowhere mentions Poe. But in the Letters, published in 1962, we find eight very laudatory references to Poe, and it is clear that Wilde had a great admiration for both writers. The basic

⁴¹⁹Ojala, I, 209.

⁴²⁰See Hartley, pp. 192 - 193.

difference between Peau de Chagrin and Dorian Gray is the lack in the latter of the didactic element which Wilde would consider an artistic defect. As Louise Rosenblatt points out,⁴²¹ Wilde borrowed from Poe his habit of alluding to strange crimes so indistinctly and yet with so much suggestion that they acquire an atmosphere of real horror. The Gothick element in the novel probably comes both directly and indirectly from Melmoth the Wanderer. Maturin had a wide influence on writers such as Poe, Scott, Hugo and Baudelaire, and Balzac wrote a sequel to his novel, Melmoth Reconcilié. Wilde's admiration for Maturin may be seen from his adoption of 'Melmoth' as a surname after his release from prison, and his friends Robert Ross and More Adey collaborated in an anonymous introduction to a new edition of Melmoth the Wanderer in 1892. Disraeli's Vivian Grey has a talismanic portrait similar in some points to Wilde's. But in the end, Dorian Gray is not a Gothick novel: the aesthetic preaching and theorising interrupt the action too much for that atmosphere to be dominant.

The influence of the 'decadent' novels is naturally more tenuous. Gautier's Mademoiselle de Maupin may contribute much to the atmosphere, but little that can be definitely determined. We are left with the two authors most widely held to be influential, Huysmans and Pater. Although in February 1894 Wilde wrote: 'The book that poisoned, or made perfect, Dorian Gray does not exist: it is a fancy of mine merely', yet in April 1892 he admitted this much:

⁴²¹L'Idée de L'Art pour L'Art dans La Littérature Anglaise Pendant la Période Victorienne, Paris, 1931.

The book in Dorian Gray is one of the many books I have never written, but it is partly suggested by Huysmans's A Rebours, which you will get at any French bookseller's. It is a fantastic variation on Huysmans's over-realistic study of the artistic temperament in our inartistic age.⁴²²

There seems to be no question that the book which had influenced Dorian Gray was based on A Rebours although Wilde's specific references to particular chapters in the revised version are intentionally misleading.⁴²³ But has criticism confused Huysmans' avowed influence on its author?

A Rebours has certain similarities to Dorian Gray, but many can be explained by the supposed influence of the book on Dorian himself. Chapter XL, for instance, with its detailed descriptions of Dorian's collections of precious stones and laces, is the result of Dorian's fascination with the interests of Des Esseintes. But the influence of Huysmans is hardly seen in the novel until Lord Henry gives Dorian the 'yellow-backed French novel' to read after Sybil's death.⁴²⁴ Dorian's tastes are thereafter influenced by those of Des Esseintes - his interest in church furniture and perfumes, and the mystique of gems, which was a common feature of the French decadents, and his fascination with heredity and the sins of the past. As Hough points out, Des Esseintes 'became a part of symbolist mythology',⁴²⁵

A Rebours is essentially a record of aesthetic

⁴²²Letters, pp. 352 and 313.

⁴²³Dorian Gray, pp. 233 - 236.

⁴²⁴Ibid. p. 198.

⁴²⁵The Last Romantics, p. 195.

and perverse pleasures and habits, of a search for new and subtle sensations, rather than a novel of action, or even of character, for Des Esseintes hardly develops in the course of the book, but is shown at one stage in his development, in every facet of it. A Rebours has only one real character, while Dorian Gray has important studies of at least three, Lord Henry, Dorian and Basil Hallward. Lord Henry's hedonism partly derives from Huysmans, as does his interested observation of the development of Dorian's character, and the effects of experience on him. This can be compared with the contrast in A Rebours between Des Esseintes' strange, rich perverse life and the brutal realism of the youth he takes from the gutter and gives expensive tastes in the opulent brothel in order to experiment with his life and lead him to crime. This contrast is paralleled in the revised version of Dorian Gray by the sordid life of the Vanes pictured beside Dorian's unreal luxury. But the main contrast is in action: Des Esseintes is already weakened, exhausted and impotent with shattered nerves after unnatural excesses at the beginning of the novel; while Wilde's novel shows the interior effects of similar excesses, whose only outward sign is the decay of the portrait. Dorian is led by Lord Henry to his way of life: Des Esseintes finds it with pleasure for himself.

The influence of A Rebours on Dorian Gray is much less than is generally thought, despite the preoccupations the authors share. A Rebours is certainly responsible for much of Dorian's character: this is made explicit:

For years, Dorian Gray could not free himself from the influence of this book. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he never sought to free himself from it . . . The hero, the wonderful young Parisian, in whom the romantic and the scientific temperaments were so strangely blended, became to him a kind of pre-figuring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it.⁴²⁶

But Merle has suggested that there was more than one reason for choosing A Rebours as Dorian's 'golden book'. Wilde could not choose The Renaissance without compromising Pater and himself: to choose a French book was safer, and A Rebours was ideal for the purpose.

But for all that, Pater's influence is exerted throughout. We see it in Lord Henry's words at the beginning of the novel: 'The aim of life is self-development,' he says:

I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream - I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of mediaevalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal - to something finer, richer, than the Hellenic ideal, it may be.⁴²⁷

When he sees the youth's reaction he is fascinated:

He was amazed at the sudden impression that his words had produced, and remembering a book that he had read when he was sixteen, a book which had revealed to him much that he had not known before, he wondered whether Dorian Gray was passing through a similar experience.

Although this book might be A Rebours, it could also be The Renaissance,

⁴²⁶Dorian Gray, p. 204.

⁴²⁷Ibid. p. 28.

and much of what Lord Henry says is either a paraphrase or a further expansion of the doctrine contained in the Conclusion of The Renaissance. Like Pater, Lord Henry dismisses metaphysics: 'The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.'⁴²⁸ He rises to a climax, again paraphrasing Pater:

Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you!
Let nothing be lost upon you! Be always searching
for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing . . .⁴²⁹

Much that is esoteric in Dorian Gray can be paralleled in Pater as well as in Huysmans. He lived surrounded by specialised literary treasures and had few friends: Pater was an ascetic Des Esseintes. He had powerful aesthetic feelings about religion, and contemplated taking orders although he was a sceptic: his friend Richard Jackson, the ^{self-claimed} model for Marius,⁴³⁰ said masses in vestments in a kind of monastery of laymen. / But the difference between Wilde and Pater, as A.P. Wood has suggested,⁴³¹ can be clearly seen by contrasting Dorian with Marius, Pater's hero. The interest in Pater's book is aesthetically religious throughout. Marius is the record of a religious development: 'For you know I think that there is a . . . sort of religious phase possible for the modern mind, the condition of which phase it is the main object of my design to convey.' Marius' watered-down Christianity, which emphasises the aesthetic and communal aspects to the exclusion of others, is a great contrast to Dorian. Lord Henry and Dorian in

⁴²⁸ Dorian Gray, p. 35.

⁴²⁹ Ibid. p. 35. Cf. Renaissance, p. 211.

⁴³⁰ G. Duthuit, Le Rose et le Noir: de Walter Pater à Oscar Wilde, p. 133.

⁴³¹ A.P. Wood, O. Wilde as a Critic, North American Review, 1915.

their hedonism carry to their logical conclusion the doctrines of The Renaissance, and perhaps Wilde is conscious of the implicit criticism of the doctrine in the deliberate perversity of Lord Henry's conclusions.

Wilde's short stories may be regarded as his apprentice pieces in preparation for Dorian Gray. Like most of his non-dramatic work, they were destined first for magazine publication, and the element of journalism has left its mark on style and treatment. Lord Arthur Savile's Crime, The Sphinx without a Secret, The Model Millionaire and The Canterville Ghost all date from 1887, the year in which Wilde went into journalism and became editor of The Woman's World. Although none of these pieces is artistically outstanding, each has style and wit enough to pass as a better-than-average magazine offering, and each contributes to Wilde's technique and helps to teach him practical lessons, which he was quick to learn and apply in Dorian Gray. None of them is very serious, at least in whole: in fact, the mixture of humour and horror, wit and mysticism gives a strange flavour.

Lord Arthur Savile's Crime is a curious tale of a young man who might have been Dorian:

He had lived the delicate and luxurious life of a young man of birth and fortune, a life exquisite in its freedom from sordid care, its beautiful boyish insouciance.⁴³²

As Dorian is awakened by the philosophy of Lord Henry, Lord Arthur

⁴³²L.A.S.C. p. 16.

is startled into a new awareness by Mr. Podgers the cheiromantist, who reads murder in his hand. 'Now for the first time he had become conscious of the terrible mystery of Destiny, of the awful meaning of Doom.'⁴³³ This revelation is to affect Lord Arthur as strongly as Lord Henry influenced Dorian, in however different a direction. As Dorian felt A Rebours pre-figured his life, so Lord Arthur feels doomed by Mr. Podgers. We see him horrorstruck, walking the mean streets as Dorian did: 'narrow shameful alleys . . . huddled upon a damp doorstep, he saw the crooked-backed forms of poverty and old.'⁴³⁴ After his rejection of Sybil, Dorian wandered 'through dimly-lit streets, past gaunt black-shadowed archways and evil looking houses . . . He had seen grotesque children huddled upon doorsteps, and heard shrieks and oaths from gloomy courts.'⁴³⁵ Both come at dawn to Covent Garden, and experience an 'anodyne' for their pain. The beauty of the scene calms their troubled minds; Dorian watched: 'a long line of boys carrying crates of striped tulips, and of yellow and red roses, defiled in front of him, threading their way through the huge jade-green piles of vegetables.'⁴³⁶ In the fresh morning air he repented, it 'seemed to drive away all his sombre passions . . . The birds that were singing in the dew-drenched garden seemed to be telling the flowers about her [Sybil]'. Lord Arthur is also unhappy over his Sybil, and in Covent Garden he sees a similar scene:

⁴³³L.A.S.C. p. 16.

⁴³⁴Ibid. p. 21.

⁴³⁵Dorian Gray, p. 141.

⁴³⁶Ibid. pp. 141 - 142.

the great piles of vegetables looked like masses of jade against the morning sky, like masses of green jade against the pink petals of some marvellous rose. Lord Arthur felt curiously affected, he could not tell why. There was something in the dawn's delicate loveliness that seemed to him inexpressibly pathetic.

He envies the rustics at the market:

They brought a little of Arcady with them. He felt that they had lived with Nature, and that she had taught them peace. He envied them all that they did not know.⁴³⁷

Each wakes up next morning to a beautiful day in rich surroundings. Each is light-hearted. For Dorian, 'it was an exquisite day. The warm air seemed laden with spices . . . He felt perfectly happy.'⁴³⁸ For Lord Arthur, 'Never had life seemed lovelier to him, never had the things of evil seemed more remote.'⁴³⁹ Each has a vivid recollection of the torment of the night before:

It was almost with a feeling of shame that he [Lord Arthur] looked back upon his mad wanderings from street to street, his fierce emotional agony. The very sincerity of his sufferings made them seem unreal to him now.⁴⁴⁰

Dorian recalls the altered portrait: 'First in the dim twilight, and then in the bright dawn, he had seen the touch of cruelty round the warped lips.'⁴⁴¹

Indeed, the flaws in Lord Arthur Savile's Crime seem to arise from the fact that it is not the tale of a Dorian Gray. It is

⁴³⁷L.A.S.C., pp. 23 - 24.

⁴³⁸Dorian Gray, p. 149.

⁴³⁹L.A.S.C., p. 25.

⁴⁴⁰Ibid. pp. 28 - 29.

⁴⁴¹Dorian Gray, p. 150.

light and witty, and horror is always tempered, and despair relieved. The plot is absurd, and so the hero's reactions cannot be taken too seriously. Wilde had seized on a popular interest in cheiromancy, one of whose best known practitioners was Edward Heron-Allen, a person friend of the Wildes'.⁴⁴² The story is in many ways like a parody of *Dorian Gray*, for even when it deals with the serious subject of murder, the treatment forbids the reader to be absorbed and terrorstricken. Lord Arthur believes that he is fated to commit murder, and his conscience is, in its way, as strange a one as that represented by the portrait in *Dorian Gray*. It does not balk at murder, but forms a high resolve that duty demands the performance of this disagreeable task before Lord Arthur is free to marry. So he solemnly begins his attempts to murder various of his relations, harmless people of whom he is rather fond, all of which attempts are doomed to failure. The continuing parallels with *Dorian Gray* merely point again the absurdity of the story. When he learns of his failure to poison Lady Clementina, as *Dorian* might, Lord Arthur 'sank on the sofa with a cry of despair.'⁴⁴³ When he fails again over the Dean of Chichester, 'It was a terrible blow to him, and for a time he was quite unnerved.'⁴⁴⁴ As *Dorian* becomes convinced that his renunciation of Hetty Merton, an attempt to perform a good deed, had been 'vanity and hypocrisy', so Lord Arthur, after failing in his attempted murders, 'was oppressed with

⁴⁴²Letters, p. 209.

⁴⁴³L.A.S.C., p. 41.

⁴⁴⁴Ibid. p. 49.

the sense of the barrenness of good intentions, of the futility of trying to be fine.⁴⁴⁵

Another coincidence is the similarity of Lady Windermere's outlook to Lord Henry Wotton's: 'that inordinate passion for pleasure which is the secret of remaining young.'⁴⁴⁶ Lady Fermor, who 'did not care a bit for music, but was extremely fond of musicians', is perhaps in germ a study for Lady Henry Wotton, who admits: 'I have simply worshipped pianists - two at a time, sometimes, Harry tells me.'⁴⁴⁷

In the world of light fiction to which Lord Arthur Savile's Crime almost entirely belongs, everything ends happily, and so a chance encounter with the cheiromantist finally provides Lord Arthur with the opportunity to fulfil his Destiny, and he can face the future with a light heart. The partial failure of Lord Arthur Savile's Crime is due to an unevenness of tone; the witty conversation and comment make the serious scenes absurdly melodramatic.

But unevenness and paradox in tone and style as well as in language helps to assure the success of the Canterville Ghost. Here the shifts of tone are handled with great skill, and the intricacies of style serve to highlight the impudent paradox of the author, who is not deriding one value in comparison to another,

⁴⁴⁵L.A.S.C., p. 54.

⁴⁴⁶Ibid. p. 4.

⁴⁴⁷Ibid. p. 11 and Dorian Gray, p. 72.

but disrespectfully poking fun at the British aristocracy, the Americans, and the histrionic ghost, turn about or simultaneously. The characteristic device by which Wilde achieves his effects in this story is anticlimax. After the stout practical good sense of the Otis family has denied the existence of ghosts, the first meeting of the ghost, Sir Simon, and Mr. Otis is described as follows:

Right in front of him he saw, in the wan moonlight, an old man of terrible aspect. His eyes were as red burning coals; long grey hair fell over his shoulders in matted coils; his garments, which were of antique cut, were soiled and ragged, and from his wrists and ankles hung heavy manacles and rusty gyves.

'My dear sir,' said Mr. Otis, 'I really must insist on your oiling those chains, and have brought you for that purpose a small bottle of the Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator. It is said to be completely efficacious upon one application, and there are several testimonials to that effect on the wrapper from some of our most eminent native divines. I shall leave it here for you by the bedroom candles, and will be happy to supply you with more should you require it.' With these words the United States Minister laid the bottle down on a marble table, and, closing his door, retired to rest.⁴⁴⁸

Sir Simon, who gloats over the misery and madness he has caused in his three hundred years of haunting, resolves to revenge himself on these stubborn Americans, and, clad in one of his most awful disguises, is on his way to Washington's room:

He chuckled to himself, and turned the corner; but no sooner had he done so than, with a piteous wail of terror, he fell back, and his his blanched face in his long, bony hands. Right in front of him was standing a horrible spectre, motionless as a carven image, and monstrous as a madman's dream! . . .

Never having seen a ghost before, he naturally was terribly frightened, and, after a second hasty glance at the awful phantom, he fled back to his room . . . ⁴⁴⁹

On his return in the daylight to meet the other ghost:

He rushed forward and seized it in his arms, when, to his horror, the head slipped off and rolled on the floor, the body assumed a recumbent posture, and he found himself clasping a white dimity bed-curtain, with a sweeping-brush, a kitchen cleaver, and a hollow turnip lying at his feet! ⁴⁵⁰

Another contemplated haunting, in the character of 'Reckless Rupert, or the Headless Earl', ends ignominiously when he is showered with cold water from a jug poised above the door, and he retires to bed with a severe cold. The story is a hilarious parody of horror stories in the Gothick manner, with fitting atmospheric effects, of thunder and lowering cloud.

The transition to a more serious note for the climax of the plot, when little Virginia frees the ghost from his ancient curse, is well managed, and the midnight funeral with full solemnity, and Lord Canterville, 'having come up specially from Wales to attend', as chief mourner, makes a fitting close, with the later marriage of Virginia and the Duke of Cheshire as epilogue.

Wilde's satire on Americans, a recurring theme, is here less virulent and more amusing than usual: it builds up throughout the story to a charming absurdity. Especially noticed are the 'immortal principles of republican simplicity' which cause Mr. Otis, who has

⁴⁴⁹ L.A.S.C., p. 85.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 87.

bought a castle, to reject on Virginia's behalf the jewels the ghost gave her as 'idle appurtenances of luxury',⁴⁵¹ and the snobbish, and to Wilde absurd idea of the culture of Mrs. Otis, 'who, I may say, is no mean authority upon Art - having had the privilege of spending several winters in Boston when she was a girl.' Most of all, perhaps, Wilde mocks the American dependence on material marvels and elixirs of life, the already mentioned Tammany Rising Sun Lubricator, and the magic cleanser with which Washington removes the mysterious bloodstain, Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent, and Doctor Dobell's Tincture, which Mrs. Otis offers the ghost in case his 'celebrated peal of demoniac laughter' rises from indigestion.⁴⁵² Again typical is the religion of these 'plain people':

They came down for family prayers, according to the simple rites of the Free American Reformed Episcopalian Church.⁴⁵³

Wilde's mastery of technique makes The Canterville Ghost a more successful story than Lord Arthur Savile's Crime. There remain two very short stories, The Model Millionaire, and The Sphinx without a Secret. These are whims or fancies, little more. The Sphinx without a Secret is a profile of a woman who had a passion for secrecy, and having no great mystery in her life, spent her life creating the appearance of mystery. The Model Millionaire is a simple tale of kindness to a beggar being rewarded when the beggar

⁴⁵¹L.A.S.C., p. 115.

⁴⁵²Ibid. p. 81.

⁴⁵³Ibid. p. 80.

turns out to be a millionaire, but like Lord Arthur Savile's Crime it has some relevance to Dorian Gray. The action takes place in the studio of a painter, Alan Trevor, who is an early Basil Hallward. Hughie Erskine resembles Dorian because he was charming, and 'wonderfully goodlooking, with his crisp brown hair, his clear-cut profile, and his grey eyes.'⁴⁵⁴ Alan Trevor resembles Basil first because he is a very good artist, and secondly because 'He had been very much attracted by Hughie at first, it must be acknowledged, entirely on account of his personal charm.'⁴⁵⁵ The Portrait of Mr. W.H. may also be considered as a preparatory work for Dorian Gray, though more of an essay perhaps than a story. But the plot does centre on the painting of a beautiful youth.

We have two main sources of influence about Wilde's critical ideas on Dorian Gray. One is the voluminous correspondence he conducted on it, making many emphatic points about it, in a way that he did about no other of his works. The other is the practical method in which, after reflection, he altered the story before it was published in book form. His critical pronouncements on Dorian Gray, at least those addressed to the press, centre of the vexed subject of morals versus art: many newspapers condemned the book as flagrantly immoral, and Wilde continued to give a paradoxical answer which yet had some truth in it - that the story had in fact a plain moral, and that the moral was too plain, artistically

⁴⁵⁴L.A.S.C., p. 135.

⁴⁵⁵Ibid. p. 137.

speaking, and all the time he insisted that moral criticism of a work of art was out of place:

I must admit that, either from temperament or from taste, or from both, I am quite incapable of understanding how any work of art can be criticised from a moral standpoint. The sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate.⁴⁵⁶

His exposition of the moral of Dorian Gray is worthy of full quotation, throwing light as it does on his aim in writing the novel:

And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment. The painter, Basil Hallward, worshipping physical beauty far too much, as most painters do, dies by the hand of one in whose soul he has created a monstrous and absurd vanity. Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tries to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself. Lord Henry Wotton seeks to be merely the spectator of life. He finds that those who reject the battle are more deeply wounded than those who take part in it. Yes; there is a terrible moral in Dorian Gray - a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but which will be revealed to all whose minds are healthy. Is this an artistic error? I fear it is. It is the only error in the book.⁴⁵⁷

In a recapitulation of this view in another letter he emphasises:

this moral is so far artistically and deliberately suppressed that it does not annunciate its law as a general principle, but realises itself purely in the lives of individuals, and so becomes simply a dramatic element in a work of art, and not the work of art itself.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁶Letters, p. 257.

⁴⁵⁷Ibid. p. 259.

⁴⁵⁸Ibid. p. 263.

But in the same letter he regrets that moral, it has not been kept 'in its proper secondary place . . . When the book is published in a volume I hope to correct this defect.'

Succinctly he sums up his doctrines of art and morals:

If a work of art is rich, vital, and complete, those who have artistic instincts will see its beauty, and those to whom ethics appeal more strongly than aesthetics will see its moral lesson . . . It will be to each man what he is himself. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.⁴⁵⁹

This phrase appealed to Wilde so much that he used it in the Preface he wrote for the novel.

He makes clear, too, in these letters, the relation he expects between critic and author. First, he objects to personal attacks:

A critic should be taught to criticise a work of art without making any reference to the personality of the author. This, in fact, is the beginning of criticism.⁴⁶⁰

This maxim has been sadly neglected by critics of Wilde, who have tended, even the best of them, to read too much of Wilde's life into his work and their comments. Then he declares his indifference to criticism:

The pleasure one has in creating a work of art is a purely personal pleasure, and it is for the sake of this pleasure that one creates. The artist works with his eye on the object. Nothing else interests him. What people are likely to say does not even occur to him . . . He is indifferent to others. I write because it gives me the greatest possible artistic pleasure to write. If my work pleases the few, I am gratified. If it does not, it causes me no pain.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁹Letters, p. 268: see also p. 269.

⁴⁶⁰Ibid. p. 260.

⁴⁶¹Ibid. p. 266.

But this is his public face, and often his private letters bely it. For instance, in a letter to the St. James's Gazette, he wrote:

Now, if I were criticising my book, which I have some thoughts of doing, I think I would consider it my duty to point out that it is far too crowded with sensational incident, and far too paradoxical in style, as far, at any rate, as the dialogue goes. I feel that from a standpoint of art these are the two defects in the book.⁴⁶²

But in a private letter he writes:

I have just finished my first long story, and am tired out. I am afraid it is rather like my own life - all conversation and no action. I can't describe action: my people sit in chairs and chatter.⁴⁶³

Once again in these letters Wilde appears as the champion of Romantic art, and the opponent of Realism: 'My story is an essay on decorative art. It reacts against the crude brutality of plain realism.'⁴⁶⁴ He defends his choice of subject and characters:

Romantic art deals with the exception and with the individual. Good people, belonging as they do to the normal, and so, commonplace type, are artistically uninteresting. Bad people are, from the point of view of art, fascinating studies . . . If they existed they would not be worth writing about. The function of the artist is to invent, not to chronicle . . . The supreme pleasure in literature is to realise the non-existent.⁴⁶⁵

He has more to say about his characters, defending his choice and hinting at his reason for drawing Lord Henry's opinions as so extreme. He agrees that his chief characters

⁴⁶²Letters, p. 260.

⁴⁶³Ibid. p. 255.

⁴⁶⁴Ibid. p. 264.

⁴⁶⁵Ibid. p. 259.

are puppies . . . I think that puppies are extremely interesting from an artistic as well as from a psychological point of view. They seem to me to be certainly far more interesting than prigs; and I am of opinion that Lord Henry Wotton is an excellent corrective of the tedious ideal shadowed forth in the semi-theological novels of our age.⁴⁶⁶

Years later, he shows his continual involvement:

I am glad you liked that strange coloured book of mine: it contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be - in other ages perhaps.⁴⁶⁷

The fruit of all the critical controversy over the first appearance of Dorian Gray is the Preface, first published as twenty-three aphorisms in the March 1891 issue of the Fortnightly Review; and printed in the book with two added aphorisms.

My novel appears in volume form next month, and I am curious to see whether these wretched journalists will assail it so ignorantly and pruriently as they did before. My preface should teach them to mend their wicked ways.⁴⁶⁸

In the Preface Wilde returns to the subjects that have concerned him in his correspondence and crystallises his reactions. First, he insists on the exclusion of the personality of the artist from the work: 'To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim.' Certainly we can accept that a work of art should be considered on its own merits, and without reference to any knowledge we may have of the author from other sources, but there are other senses in which the artist is never completely concealed in the work of art.

⁴⁶⁶Letters, p. 258.

⁴⁶⁷Ibid. p. 352.

⁴⁶⁸Ibid. p. 290.

In The Critic as Artist Wilde himself wrote that 'all fine imaginative work is self-conscious and deliberate.'⁴⁶⁹ He denied the idea of folklore as a communal creation: 'there is no art where there is no style, and no style where there is no unity, and unity is of the individual . . . The longer one studies life and literature, the more strongly one feels that behind everything that is wonderful stands the individual.'⁴⁷⁰ Professor Dobree has described the place of personality in literature:

Only those books into which much of the writer's self has entered make that peculiar appeal to us, which we feel when we say, 'This is a good book.' . . . This is not to say that a writer is concerned with his personality: the greater artist he is, the less he will think about it, the more he will be intent on the thing he is doing . . . Whenever we read a book . . . we are aware of a voice. . . . It is this voice which we roughly call style, and however much a writer may ignore his personality, even seek to conceal it, he cannot disguise his voice, his style, unless he is deliberately writing a parody.⁴⁷¹

Impressionism in criticism next absorbs Wilde: 'The highest, as the lowest form of art, is a mode of autobiography.' He is concerned with the 'meaning' of a work of art. While only corrupt people find ugly meanings in beautiful things, and cultivated people find beautiful meanings, 'They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.' Then he declares that art is 'at once surface and symbol', and it is dangerous either to go beneath the surface or to read the symbol. Once again he is

⁴⁶⁹Intentions, p. 126.

⁴⁷⁰Ibid. p. 127. Cf. Letters, p. 466.

⁴⁷¹Bonamy Dobree, Modern Prose Style, 1964, p. 3.

reinforcing his mystique of art. Of course in essence the meaning of a book is the contents of a book, the words chosen by the author best conveying the 'meaning', but it is only the purist who will not allow us therefore to discuss the book's meaning. But Wilde does allow the critic to record his reactions to the book: 'The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things', and every reader has his individual impression, informed by his own personality, even though he cannot translate it thus. 'It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors' - this is a fair defence against the critics who screamed at the moral corruption of Dorian Gray:

It was necessary, sir, for the dramatic development of this story to surround Dorian Gray with an atmosphere of moral corruption . . . To keep this atmosphere vague and indeterminate and wonderful was the aim of the artist who wrote the story . . . Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them.⁴⁷²

Many of the aphorisms are concerned with the refusal to subordinate Art to any principles but artistic ones; in particular, the rejection of moral issues: 'Virtue and vice are to the artist materials for an art.' Art is therefore 'useless', because he places it beyond Life and the petty concerns of Life, above morals, as something simply to enjoy or contemplate.

As the original version of the book in Lippincott's Monthly Magazine is hard to obtain, it is best to summarise briefly the

⁴⁷²Letters, p. 266.

contents before examining the important structural changes Wilde made in the revised form.

Chapter I introduces the two main characters, Basil Hallward the painter, Lord Henry Wotton the dandy and man-about-town, and their subject of conversation, Dorian Gray, Basil's friend and model, and exceptionally beautiful young man. Basil is reluctant to tell Lord Henry about his model, and reticent about the fine painting in progress. He confesses that Dorian Gray has become an obsession with him, so that he fears the extraordinary influence the boy exerts on him. Despite Basil's efforts, Lord Henry intends to meet Dorian Gray, and Basil fears he will influence him for the bad.

Chapter 2. Lord Henry meets Dorian and talks to him as he poses, introducing him to the tenets of his new Hedonism, and opening new realms for him. Lord Henry insists on the inestimable value of youth, and the tragedy of its passing, for with his creed of living for pleasure youth is all-important. Basil finishes the portrait, and this finally gives Dorian a sense of his own beauty, and he feels jealous of the painting because it will not age - so jealous that he wishes the portrait could age and he himself remain always young. Lord Henry's influence is shown to be increasing.

Chapter 3. A month later, Dorian is quite intimate with Lord Henry, and confesses that he is in love with an unknown actress, Sybil Vane. He is inspired by her wonderful acting of Shakespeare.

He asks Lord Henry and Basil to come to see her act the next day, and rushes off to the theatre. Lord Henry contemplates Dorian as an interesting psychological study, and regards him almost as the subject of a scientific experiment, conscious that he has already speeded and guided his development in certain directions, and interested in the future results. He receives a telegram from Dorian announcing his engagement to Sybil.

Chapter 4. Lord Henry and Basil meet, Basil upset at the news, and they dine with Dorian. Dorian relates his romance, Lord Henry being cynical about women. Sybil makes Dorian regret Lord Henry's 'wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories!'

Chapter 5. The three find Sybil beautiful, but her acting dreadful. Dorian is very upset, and his friends leave. Dorian sees Sybil afterwards, and she glories in her bad acting, declaring that real love had made her work seem quite unreal to her. Dorian cruelly rejects her: she no longer stirs his imagination. Despite her pitiful pleas he leaves her, and walks all night, reaching Covent Garden at dawn, and going home. There he finds the first change in the portrait, and is staggered by it. He remembers his wish in Basil's studio, and determines to amend his life, so as not to be tormented by the changing portrait.

Chapter 6. Next day he finds the portrait really changed, and determines to undo his cruelty and marry Sybil. Lord Henry visits him and tells him Sybil is dead, having taken poison after Dorian's departure. Lord Henry perverts his remorse and encourages his egotism. He forgets his good resolutions and looks forward to the portrait's changes.

Chapter 7. Basil visits Dorian to console him, and is horrified at the change in him. He is upset that a screen hides the portrait, and Dorian refuses to let him see it. Basil wishes to exhibit it, but Dorian sidetracks him by forcing from him a confession of his idolatry of Dorian. Basil goes, and Dorian resolves to hide the portrait.

Chapter 8. Dorian arranges the removal of the picture to a locked room in the attics. He reads an account of the inquest on Sybil Vane, verdict death by misadventure, and then turns to a book Lord Henry has sent. This book fascinates him, and seems poisonous.

Chapter 9. The book's influence is fully described, and Dorian's copying of the hero in his interests, both sensual pleasures and artistic absorption in religions, perfumes, music, gems, embroideries. The years pass with these interests: Dorian remains beautiful and the portrait reflects his life. He becomes afraid to leave it. The poisoning is complete.

Chapter 10. Years later, when Dorian is thirty-two, Basil comes to see him en route for Paris, to inquire the truth of the fearful rumours he has heard of Dorian. Dorian offers to show him his soul.

Chapter 11. Dorian takes Basil upstairs and shows him the portrait. Basil is horrified, and now believes the evil tales he has heard. He exhorts Dorian to repent, to pray. On impulse Dorian seizes a knife and stabs him to death. He is calm and covers his tracks, providing himself with an alibi.

Chapter 12. Next day he sends word to a scientist, Alan Campbell, and reads poetry until his arrival. He tells Campbell the situation and pleads for help, which Campbell refuses, having reason to hate him. At last he blackmails Campbell into chemically destroying the body. Campbell sends for equipment and all traces of the body are destroyed.

Chapter 13. Now Dorian resolves again to change his life, although Lord Henry is sceptical. Dorian has already performed an act of self-sacrifice by refraining from seducing a country girl. Lord Henry accuses him of vanity and hypocrisy. After he leaves Lord Henry, Dorian hurries to see if the portrait is altered for the better; instead it has become hypocritical, and he becomes terrified. He determines to destroy the portrait, this conscience, to free himself. He stabs it, and is found, a wrinkled, horrible old man, before the portrait of his radiant youth.

The main apparent defect in this structure is that there is not enough definite incident. In particular, we are told of only three events that mar the portrait, the death of Sybil, the murder of Basil, and the renunciation of Hetty. Chapter 9 has to convey by itself the passing of time - of at least fifteen years, and it is mainly concerned with Dorian's hobbies rather than his sinful acts. His great fear⁴⁷³ that the portrait might be seen is hardly justified: there is no evidence against him: no one is seeking to destroy him. He need show the portrait to no one, although he does show it to Basil. His sudden decision to reform after the successful

⁴⁷³Lippincott, p. 73.

elimination of all evidence of Basil's murder is unexplained and unprepared for, and by the very emphasis on Dorian we lose the vividness that might come from contrast.

Let us see what was added. There were six new chapters, which we will number (A) to (F). (A) is inserted between chapters 2 and 3 of the Lippincott version. It describes Lord Henry's investigation of Dorian's romantic background; his mother's beauty and her runaway love affair, her husband's death in a duel arranged by her father, and her own death. This clearly places Dorian more firmly:

Yes; it was an interesting background. It posed the lad, made him more perfect, as it were. Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic.⁴⁷⁴

Lord Henry becomes more determined to fashion Dorian into 'a marvellous type'. He goes to a society lunch with Dorian, and there we see his impudent paradoxical social face, and the sophisticated society which admires him. Dorian becomes more and more enslaved. He resolves to go with Lord Henry afterwards, though he has arranged to see Basil. This chapter forms a satisfactory 'filling-out' both of Dorian's background and of the progress of his relationship with Lord Henry, which in the earlier version jumps from his first meeting with him to his confession of love for Sybil a month later.

Chapter (B) is added between chapters 3 and 4 of the original. It provides us with a welcome contrast of environment and personality. We see Sybil at home in poor lodgings with her embittered, over-theatrical mother and her aggressive brother, who is about to leave

⁴⁷⁴Dorian Gray, p. 56.

for Australia but is full of suspicion and jealousy of his sister's unknown lover. We see that Sybil is indeed an unusual girl; it is not only Dorian's infatuation that sees her so. She is young, passionate, pure, and with a great gift for happiness. Her brother's sullen threats give the first hint of coming disaster and of later revenge. This chapter again establishes the characters more fully, and at the same time prepares the way for the new side of the plot that is to be introduced.

Chapters (C) to (F) are all introduced between chapters 12 and 13 of Lippincott, between Basil's murder and Dorian's good resolutions. Chapter (C) changes the earlier scheme completely. Instead of ignoring all the psychological effects of Basil's murder with the elimination of the body, Wilde now shows us Dorian proceeding straightaway to a dinner party, and his reactions there. He is out of sorts and nervous. He snaps at Lord Henry when questioned about the night before, and quite unnecessarily flourishes his alibi. He hurries home to destroy Basil's effects, and even then is not at peace. He cannot relax, and begins to feel 'a mad craving'. At midnight, dressed in common clothes, he creeps from the house and hires a cab.

Chapter (D) supplies a want in the earlier version. For the first time we see the low haunts often alluded to briefly; we see people Dorian has ruined and the degradation they have reached. As he drives to the docks, Dorian repeats feverishly the doctrine Lord Henry had taught him at their first meeting: 'To cure the

soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul'.⁴⁷⁵ He will try it yet again, and seek refuge in opium from the sickness of his soul: he rejects the possibility of forgiveness and seizes on a chance of forgetfulness. We are shown the sordid, fantastic interior of the opium den, and appropriately Dorian meets one of the young men Basil had accused him of destroying, Adrian Singleton. He decides to leave so as to forget his identity, to go to the other den where no one will know him. A woman he also ruined comes up, and he tries to get rid of her with money. As he leaves she screams abuse after him, and calls him 'Prince Charming', at which a sailor who has been drowsing rises and hurries out. Dorian is attacked in the dark street by a man who declares he will kill him: this man, the sailor, is James Vane, who has been searching for Dorian for years, without knowing his name, to seek revenge. Dorian saves himself only by quick thinking. Sybil died eighteen years ago: he forces the man to look at him, and his boy's face convinces Vane he is wrong. Dorian rebukes him with presence of mind and goes. But the woman has followed, and persuades Vane that Dorian is indeed the man he is searching for. Dorian has escaped, but now we know he is in danger.

The next chapter, (E), forms a striking contrast in atmosphere and characters. Dorian is holding a house party at his country seat, flirting with a Duchess. He leaves to get orchids for her, and the light, witty conversation she has with Lord Henry shows that she is in love with Dorian. They follow him to the conservatory,

⁴⁷⁵Dorian Gray, p. 298. Cf. p. 32.

to find him in a dead faint: through the window he has seen James Vane watching him. Chapter (F) relates how after three days of sick fear Dorian recovers completely his joy in life, persuading himself that the sight of Vane was only imagination. He goes out with a shooting party, and his companion aims at a hare. Admiring its grace, Dorian asks him not to shoot, but he does, and a cry of agony is heard. A man is killed, and Dorian is filled again with horror, seeing it as an evil omen. In his terror his steward comes to him, troubled about the identity of the dead man who seems to be a sailor. With a wild hope, Dorian hurries to view the body, and with tremendous joy he recognises Vane and feels safe at last. This incident forms a much more satisfactory reason for Dorian's good intentions revealed in the next chapter: his delivery from danger gives him a new chance which with his impulsive nature he eagerly seizes.

The final chapter is supplied by dividing the original chapter 13 into two, giving twenty chapters in all. None of the new chapters is inserted haphazardly: each is carefully fitted into the overall structure. The history of Dorian's mother and the threats of James Vane, for example, are referred to in insertions in existing chapters. A few passages are excluded, such as the full description of Lady Brandon in chapter 1, which was thought to be a caricature of Lady Wilde, and the description of Mrs. Leaf, Dorian's house-keeper, which is over-sentimentalised, and presents a type, not an

individual. Certain passages are added, of which we will examine a few. When Dorian is singing Sybil's praises to Lord Henry and Basil, a new conversation is introduced,⁴⁷⁶ in which Lord Henry again elaborates his theory of life, insisting that:- 'Pleasure is nature's test, her sign of approval', that 'to be good is to be at harmony with oneself', and that one must not concern oneself with the lives of one's neighbours. Basil suggests that such a life will be paid for in remorse and suffering, but Lord Henry is adamant: 'No civilised man ever regrets a pleasure.'⁴⁷⁷ This passage, as we shall see, emphasises the main theme of the novel.

In the revised version⁴⁷⁸ Dorian answers Basil's accusations by disclaiming responsibility for the fates of others, on the lines suggested by the last insertion. 'You ask me about Henry Ashton and young Perth. Did I teach the one his vices and the other his debauchery?' Finally, in the penultimate chapter Dorian's feeling of guilt forces him to return again and again to the subject of Basil's murder, and he suggests that he might have killed him, a suggestion that Lord Henry ridicules. Dorian is nervous and frightened, and convinced, despite Lord Henry's scepticism, of the reality of the soul.⁴⁷⁹

These changes have the effect of immensely enriching the novel, in action and character, and even in the ideas of life it examines.

⁴⁷⁶Dorian Gray, pp. 123 - 126.

⁴⁷⁷Ibid. p. 125.

⁴⁷⁸Ibid. pp. 243 - 244.

⁴⁷⁹Ibid. pp. 344 - 348.

The improvement can be judged if we consider the possible result if Wilde had taken the easiest way, and padded the novel to the required size by long descriptions in the manner of Huysmans.

Apart from structural changes, Wilde made meticulous stylistic revisions in the novel. It is again clear in his correspondence⁴⁸⁰ that Wilde's changes were his own, and suggestions from the publishers upset him. He is careful to ask Kernahan to correct his 'wills' and 'shalls': 'I am Celtic in my use of these words, not English.' He insists on the necessity for his passing the proofs before it goes to press. The stylistic changes follow certain patterns. The technicalities of dialogue receive a lot of care: and where Dorian consistently 'murmurs' his remarks in Lippincott, in the revised form he 'falters, laughs, cries, echoes, interrupts, answers and rejoins'. Where Basil in Lippincott is consistently referred to as Basil Hallward or Hallward, he becomes 'the painter' or 'the artist', and conversely, Dorian, often in the earlier form 'the lad' is almost always given his full name.

But the most obvious change is the improvement of sentence cadence, and avoidance of roughness. Here are the changes in two sentences:-

"He told me once, with an air of pride, that his three bankruptcies were entirely due to the poet, whom he insisted on calling 'The Bard'". (Lippincott, p. 27.)

"He told me once, with an air of pride, that his five bankruptcies were entirely due to 'The Bard', as he insisted on calling him". (Dorian Gray, p. 84.)

⁴⁸⁰Letters, p. 289.

"'Culture and corruption', murmured Dorian . . . ! It seems to me curious now that they should ever be found together."

(Lippincott, p. 94.)

"'Culture and corruption', echoed Dorian . . . ! It seems terrible to me now that they should ever be found together."

(Dorian Gray, p. 339.)

The first of these examples also shows Wilde's idiosyncrasy of increasing every number in his revision: Basil's murder in Lippincott takes place on the seventh of November, the eve of Dorian's thirty-second birthday; this becomes the ninth of the month, the eve of his thirty-eighth birthday. Almost always if there seems no other reason for it, the new number alliterates, as in ninth of November.

Zola wrote a novel, A Love Affair, in which he used the city of Paris almost as another character: the changing view of Paris from the heroine's window was a gauge of her feelings and her fortunes. In a similar fashion, but with more complexity, Wilde uses London in his novel. London is the scene of the book: almost every incident takes place there, and we are made always conscious of the surroundings. The tone of the description is always significant, either reflecting the passions of the heroes, or mocking their hopes. The novel opens with an idyllic garden scene; the garden is the small, civilised outdoors of the London scene. Even at the first, 'The dim roar of London was like the bourdon note of a distant organ.'⁴⁸¹ The summer garden symbolises

⁴⁸¹Dorian Gray, p. 2.

the youth and beauty of the hero and his golden prospects - and perhaps, when Lord Henry begins to fascinate Forian, it has a certain reminiscence of Eden, with Lord Henry as the tempter: 'Dorian Gray listened, open-eyed and wondering. The spray of lilac fell from his hand upon the gravel.'⁴⁸²

After this, almost all of the action takes place indoors; the philosophy of artificiality belongs in the works of artifice.

Egotism itself, which is so necessary to a proper sense of human dignity, is entirely the result of indoor life. Out of doors one becomes abstract and impersonal . . . And then Nature is so indifferent, so unappreciative.⁴⁸³

We see Lord Henry at the Albany, and at luncheon in Berkeley Square. Almost all the social conversation in the novel takes place round the table. The characters live in Mayfair, and some do philanthropic work in the East End. London is a register of rank and position. We meet the Vanes in a dingy lodging in Euston Road, and Dorian first met Sybil by accident:

One evening about seven o'clock I determined to go out in search of some adventure. I felt that this grey monstrous London of ours, with its myriads of people; its sordid sinners and its splendid sins, as you once phrased it, must have something in store for me. I fancied a thousand things . . . I don't know what I expected, but I went out and wandered eastward, soon losing my way in a labyrinth of grimy streets, and black, grassless squares. About half past eight I passed by an absurd little theatre, with great flaring gas-jets and gaudy play-bills.⁴⁸⁴

Sybil's beauty and sweetness is always in contrast to her tawdry

⁴⁸²Dorian Gray, p. 36.

⁴⁸³Intentions, p. 5.

⁴⁸⁴Dorian Gray, pp. 76 - 77.

surroundings.

After his scene with Sybil, Dorian again wanders the streets, and visits Covent Garden at dawn, as did Lord Arthur Savile, and Gilbert and Ernest of The Critic As Artist.⁴⁸⁵ He goes home calmer at daybreak. Night has a special importance, and is the scene of all the unpleasant incidents. When he covers the painting in horror and makes good resolutions, all his terror leaves him, he feels renewed, and birds sing in the 'dew-drenched' garden.⁴⁸⁶ Reading the poisonous book Lord Henry sent him, Dorian is 'unconscious of the falling day and creeping shadows. Cloudless, and pierced by one solitary star, a copper-green sky gleamed through the windows.'⁴⁸⁷ Evil belongs to the night: Basil's murder takes place on a night that is cold and very foggy, and when it is complete, 'The wind had blown the fog away, and the sky was like a monstrous peacock's tail, starred with myriads of golden eyes',⁴⁸⁸ - once Dorian has resolved not to 'realise' his deed. These changes reflect the variation in Dorian's wilful temperament, his determination not to dwell on unpleasantness. A cold, stormy night is the scene for Dorian's visit to the opium-den and his encounter with James Vane, while the house party at Selby enjoys warm, sunny weather. We almost always see James Vane, the rough and honest sailor, in the open air, and Dorian indoors. This climax occurs when Vane looks in a window to watch Dorian in the conservatory, the home of exotic

⁴⁸⁵Intentions, p. 224.

⁴⁸⁶Dorian Gray, p. 147.

⁴⁸⁷Ibid. p. 202.

⁴⁸⁸Ibid. p. 257.

plants. Dorian dies alone, at night, indoors, and in his locked, secret room.

Dorian Gray is a description of the Decadence, an examination of Lord Henry's hedonism. The fundamentals are shown in Dorian's life; in the necessity, taught by Lord Henry, to organise experience before you let it affect you. Lord Henry helps him to react with egotism to Sybil's death; he teaches that Sybil was not real:

The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died . . . The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away. Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled. Cry out against Heaven because the daughter of Brabantio died. But don't waste your tears over Sybil Vane. She was less real than they are.⁴⁸⁹

This is an extreme example of 'treating life in the spirit of art'.

Dorian himself immediately objectivises Basil's murder - he watches the scene dispassionately and 'strangely calm'. He leaves the room.

He felt that the secret of the whole thing was not to realise the situation. The friend who had painted the fatal portrait, to which all his misery had been due, had gone out of his life. That was enough.⁴⁹⁰

This perverse rationalisation is the best method of escaping hurt, but others include books, such as A Rebours which create a world of escape from harsh reality, and drugs, 'curing the soul by means of the senses'.

The book has often been criticised for an apparent dichotomy between the witty dialogue and the fearful interior action, but

⁴⁸⁹Dorian Gray, p. 165.

⁴⁹⁰Ibid. p. 257.

this can be seen as a searching, essentially honest investigation of Lord Henry's hedonism. The wit and paradox of Lord Henry, represent the side of the philosophy which Wilde personally found immensely attractive, but Basil Hallward represents the knowledge of the cost of this disdain for humanity, and his warning words, like the portrait, show the reality of conscience and the soul, and the impossibility of attempting to reject all responsibility for others, in the subordination of all the world to the individual's pleasure. The light and the dark sides of the novel alike represent the practical results of the philosophy of the Decadence, and the revised version is constantly pointed to demonstrate this more clearly. The novel is non-realistic and Romantic, but a powerfully true psychological study of pleasure and guilt. It is not only, as it is often shown to be, a supreme example of the Decadence, but it is also a mature analysis of its perils and inherent self-destruction.

CHAPTER SIX

The Fairy Tales

Wilde's Fairy tales, published in two collections, in 1888 and 1891, chronologically precede Dorian Gray. But in other ways they seem to stand outside the natural development of his artistic works, because of the different ideals they present. Even in Vera, the vein of easy, witty cynicism is established; it continues in Dorian Gray, in Intentions and in the comedies, at its most succinct in his collected aphorisms, such as Phrases and Philosophies For The Use of The Young. But the Fairy tales represent different values, opposing ones. Are they for this reason not typical of Wilde, as critics have suggested, perhaps written merely to please his wife?⁴⁹¹ Or, if they do proceed from his basic beliefs, do they represent the only truth about Wilde, as other sentimental and sympathetic critics have suggested? These questions show a certain basic misunderstanding of Wilde, which renders them impossible to answer.

In his criticism Wilde could take three or four attitudes in turn: surely then in his imaginative prose he could examine in Dorian Gray the beauty and the perils of one attitude towards life, and in his Tales the beauty of aspects of the Christian ideal, or of a less clearly delineated, more personal philosophy of life. This dual possibility in the meaning of the Tales

⁴⁹¹Ransome, p. 92.

brings out at once a basic fact about them. Although it is not possible to make a sharp division between the two collections, saying that the values in The Happy Prince are Christian and in A House of Pomegranates personal - for personal values abound in The Happy Prince and in A House of Pomegranates Christian values are very important, in The Young King and The Star-Child at least - yet there is some ground of difference between them. Perhaps it is merely a difference of style or model: perhaps, as Merle suggested, the first collection presents morals where the second presents symbols,⁴⁹² perhaps the second collection is more complex, less intended for children.

Both sets of stories reveal an intense enjoyment of physical beauty, and a great sense of the importance of beauty, but also a sense of beauty in actions and motives, a beauty which it is very easy to equate with goodness. Often, there is an imitation of the beauty of the visual arts: as Salome was in part inspired by Moreau's Hérodiade, so The Birthday of the Infanta owes much to the court paintings of Velasquez.

The first collection, The Happy Prince, is delightful, simple and happy. Pater reacted with great delight: this was the kind of work he would wish his disciple to produce. His epithet was in fact 'delightful', and he declared that 'the whole, too brief book abounds with delicate touches and pure English.'⁴⁹³ The inspiration of this volume seems to derive from Hans Andersen,

⁴⁹²Merle, p. 271

⁴⁹³Letters, p. 219 n.

from Flaubert and from the Bible. The language, like some of Flaubert's, is Biblically derived, and the ideas are of Andersen's simple, uncomplicated world of right and wrong, black and white. Andersen's tales rarely picture fairies; Wilde's never do. Where the supernatural intervenes, it is the supernatural of the Christian ideal, and where the anti-realistic occurs it is in the well known fairy tale mode of talking animals and even personified things.

Wilde avoids sentimentality in the Tales by witty, irreverent comment: the swallow saves The Happy Prince from any danger of it, as the narrator's comment dispels it from The Nightingale and The Rose, and the animals' squabbles from The Devoted Friend. Many critics conclude that the fundamental difference between the collections is in the inspiration: the result of Alice Herzog's detailed study is summarised thus: 'What Andersen means to Wilde's first collection of fairy tales, Flaubert means to the second.'⁴⁹⁴ Each of the stories has a certain moral; but as in Dorian Gray, although more obviously, the moral is not enunciated as a general principle, but presented through characters and actions: and unlike most fairy tales, virtue usually has to be its own reward, for the good in both series suffer and often die.

In the title story of the first collection, The Happy Prince both the principal characters perish. The Happy Prince in his mortal existence led a life of carefree luxury, like Dorian Gray paying no heed to the toil and cares of the poor and needy,

⁴⁹⁴Die Märchen Wildes, p. 57

never thinking that their work has supported his easy life. His life of pleasure earned him the name of the Happy Prince, although now he knows the difference Dorian never learned, between pleasure and happiness. After his death, a statue was set above the city, covered in gold and with jewelled eyes. This was the refuge of the frivolous swallow, who outstayed the summer courting a Reed by the river. He was still in quest of pleasure, of the magic sights of Egypt, which he described glowingly to the Prince, but he stayed at first, for just one night. The Prince was now filled with compassion for the poor of the city, and asked the swallow to take the ruby from his sword-hilt to a poor seamstress with a sick child. The Prince's motive was pity for the poor; the swallow was less sentimental: 'I don't think I like boys',⁴⁹⁵, but he took pity on the Prince's sadness. After this, daily the Prince implored the swallow to go on errands of mercy and daily he sang of Egypt but relented for just one more time, until the Prince's jewelled eyes were gone and the swallow had to find the poor for him, and distribute in separate leaves the Prince's gold covering. When the Prince lived and had eyes he saw nothing: now a statue and sightless he sees realities. As winter proceeded, the swallow suffered from cold, but loved the Prince too much to leave him: before he died he kissed the Prince, and the Prince's heart broke. The town Council decided that the statue was too shabby, and melted it down, but the leaden heart would not melt,

⁴⁹⁵Tales, p. 174.

and when God asked for the two most precious things in the city, an angel brought Him the dead bird and the broken heart.

This almost over-pathetic story is saved from sentimentality by the carefully measured lightness of tone, and the visions of the Swallow. After his first errand of mercy the Swallow returned to the Prince:-

'It is curious,' he remarked, 'but I feel quite warm now, although it is so cold.' 'That is because you have done a good action,' said the Prince. And the little Swallow began to think, and then he fell asleep. Thinking always made him sleepy.⁴⁹⁶

The Swallow's love of exotic pleasures balances the Prince's humanitarian sympathies:-

He told him of the red ibises, who stand in long rows on the banks of the Nile, and catch goldfish in their beaks; of the Sphinx, who is as old as the world itself, and lives in the desert, and knows everything; of the merchants, who walk slowly by the side of their camels and carry amber beads in their hands; of the King of the Mountains of the Moon, who is as black as ebony, and worships a large crystal; of the great green snake that sleeps in a palm-tree, and has twenty priests to feed it with honey-cakes; and of the pygmies who sail over a big lake on large flat leaves, and are always at war with the butterflies.

'Dear little Swallow,' said the Prince, 'You tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and women. There is no Mystery so great as Misery.'⁴⁹⁷

The Prince's love of men and the Swallow's love of the Prince both lead to death: there is no tangible reward. This is why at the

⁴⁹⁶Tales p. 174.

⁴⁹⁷Ibid. p. 179.

end God takes them both to Paradise. Seen in terms of beauty and ugliness, the tale advocates inner beauty of feeling rather than outer splendour.

The Nightingale and The Rose is much sadder, because here the sacrifice appears to be useless. In general terms it represents the contrast between real and unreal love, between selfless and selfish love. As in the other tales, except The Devoted Friend, we are plunged immediately into the story. It begins:-

'She said that she would dance with me if I brought her red roses,' cried the young Student, 'but in all my garden there is no red rose.'⁴⁹⁸

The crux of the plot is stated in the first sentence. The Student's love is calf-love, melodramatic and shallow. Again we have to look inside as well as out: he was a very good-looking young man, but his lack of depth is shown in the story, and it is clear from the start that if his lover puts so much importance on his bringing her a rose, she is indulging a caprice, not feeling true love. The Nightingale listened to the Student's lament, and went to seek a rose for him.

There was only one way to obtain a red rose - by sacrificing her own life, singing with her breast against a thorn. But to the Nightingale love was very important:- "Yet Love is better than Life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a

⁴⁹⁸Tales, p. 187

man?"⁴⁹⁹ So all night she sang of love as the thorn pierced her; the thorn is the cost of the rose. As she died at dawn, it was perfected. The Student took it to his love, who rejected it in favour of jewels from another suitor. In disgust, the Student threw the rose away and returned to his books.

The Nightingale's love was perfect, almost Christlike love:-
'the Love that is perfected by Death, the Love that dies not in the tomb.'⁵⁰⁰ The story can even be read as a Christian allegory; the Nightingale must sacrifice herself wholly for love:-

'If you want a red rose,' said the Tree, 'you must build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with your own heart's-blood. You must sing to me with your breast against a thorn. All night long you must sing to me, and the thorn must pierce your heart, and your life-blood must flow into my veins, and become mine.'⁵⁰¹

It can also be seen as an allegory of art, as Merle has suggested. The Nightingale can symbolise the destiny of the artist who must sing with utmost agony for the sake of a capricious, uncomprehending public. In fact, for once we can almost completely agree with Wilde's comment on his own work:-

I am afraid that I don't think as much of the Student as you do. He seems to me a rather shallow young man and almost as bad as the girl he thinks he loves. The nightingale is the true lover, if there is one. She, at least, is Romance, and the Student and the girl are, like most of us, unworthy of Romance. So, at least, it seems to me, but I like to fancy that there may be many meanings in the tale, for in writing it I did not start with an idea and clothe it in form, but began with a form and strove to

⁴⁹⁹Ibid. p. 192.

⁵⁰⁰Ibid. p. 195.

⁵⁰¹Tales, p. 191.

make it beautiful enough to have many secrets
and many answers.⁵⁰²

Again, the pathos is enlivened by gentle wit: the Student could not understand the Nightingale, 'for he only knew the things that are written down in books'⁵⁰³: we can compare Wilde's dictum: 'But it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.'⁵⁰⁴

The Christian idealism of The Selfish Giant, as of The Happy Prince, is quite open. The tale is one of the simplest Wilde wrote, uncomplicated in style, in plot, in significance. The story starts in the Giant's garden, when he is away on a long visit. The children used to play there every afternoon, but when the Giant returned he angrily drove them out. Now the Children had nowhere to play, and the birds and flowers left the garden in sympathy. Snow and frost invaded the garden, and it was perpetual winter there. One day, the Giant heard sounds of spring, and looking out of his window saw children in all but one of the twelve trees in the garden, and blossoms everywhere except in one corner where a little boy too small to reach his tree cried in the snow. The Giant hurried out to help him up, and vowed the children could always play there. He broke down the wall, but he could never again see the little boy who had kissed him for his help. Time went on, until the Giant was too

⁵⁰²Letters, p. 218.

⁵⁰³Tales, p. 192.

⁵⁰⁴Letters, p. 869.

old to play with the children and watched them from a chair. One day in winter he saw one corner of the garden full of blossoms, and in it, his favourite child, with nail-wounds on his hands and feet. The child took his soul to Paradise.

The very shortness of this tale seems to indicate that Wilde knew that he could not sustain a theme so perilously close to sentimentality for long: the style is not richly decorated, and there is only one tiny flash of wit:-

After the seven years were over he had said all that he had to say, for his conversation was limited, and he determined to return to his own castle.⁵⁰⁵

It must remain a question of personal opinion whether Wilde succeeded in sustaining the appropriate tone in this tale: I feel it is perhaps his least successful as a work of art, and one cause of this may be that the style of narration is direct, and is not enlivened, as in the other tales, with dialogue.

Certainly the two tales following take refuge much more in subjects which if they are not slighter, at least do not attempt to reach the sublime. There is more wit, and more dialogue, which Wilde handles expertly, and with which he can control the effect at will. The Devoted Friend is a delightful satire on selfishness, pomposity and hypocrisy. Unlike the other stories, it is set in a double frame. The story is told as a result of a discussion between a Linnet and a Water-rat. The introduction

⁵⁰⁵Tales, p. 201

is fresh and interesting, the animals lively and life-like. The old Water-rat had 'bright beady eyes and stiff grey whiskers, and his tail was like a long bit of black indiarubber.'⁵⁰⁶ The little ducks looked like yellow canaries, and their mother was 'pure white with real red legs'. The discussion of love leads the Water-rat to declare that he, a bachelor, prefers the idea of devoted friendship: '"I should expect my devoted friend to be devoted to me, of course."⁵⁰⁷ And the Linnet offers to tell a story.

Its hero is Hans, an 'honest little fellow', whose garden is described in the nearest approach to the decorative style that this story offers, a list of those English flowers best loved by Shakespeare and Keats. The story really concentrates on the Miller's self-satisfied attitude towards friendship, and secondarily, in contrast, of Hans' own. The Miller's devotion takes the form of helping himself to any of Hans' few possessions that takes his fancy, with no thought of return, although Hans was poor and the Miller very rich. In winter, when Hans was very badly off, the Miller deserted him, with splendidly casuistical reasons for so doing:-

'There is no good in my going to see little Hans as long as the snow lasts,' the Miller used to say to his wife, 'for when people are in trouble they should be left alone and not be bothered by

⁵⁰⁶Ibid. p. 211.

⁵⁰⁷Ibid. p. 212

visitors. That at least is my idea about friendship, and I am sure I am right. So I shall wait till the spring comes, and then I shall pay him a visit, and he will be able to give me a large basket of primroses, and that will make him so happy.'⁵⁰⁸

In contrast, the Miller's son offered to share his porridge with Hans, but with reasoning typical of some Victorian commercial thinking the Miller poured scorn on the idea:-

'Why, if little Hans came up here, and saw our warm fire, and our good supper, and our great cask of red wine, he might get envious, and envy is a most terrible thing, and would spoil anybody's nature. I certainly will not allow Hans' nature to be spoiled. I am his best friend, and I will always watch over him, and see that he is not led into any temptations. Besides, if Hans came here, he might ask me to let him have some flour on credit, and that I could not do. Flour is one thing, and friendship is another, and they should not be confused.'⁵⁰⁹

With the coming of spring, the Miller duly went for his flowers, and promised to give Hans his old, worn-out wheelbarrow. On the strength of this promise, he proceeded to take up all Hans' time, making him work all day and neglect his garden, and feeling very generous all the time. Hans was very impressed by the Miller's talk, which was full of 'beautiful ideas', and the Miller encouraged him:- "At present you have only the practice of friendship: some day you will have the theory also."⁵¹⁰ One stormy evening the Miller came to ask Hans to fetch a doctor for his son, but refused the loan of his lantern in case anything

⁵⁰⁸Tales, p. 215.

⁵⁰⁹Ibid. p. 216.

⁵¹⁰Ibid. p. 226.

happened to it. Hans trudged off in the dark, and three hours later woke the Doctor and fulfilled his errand. But on the way home he lost his way, fell into a deep hole and was drowned. The Miller took first place at the funeral, as Hans' best friend.

When the Linnet finishes the story, the Water-rat is waiting to hear more of the Miller:-

'I'm afraid you don't quite see the moral of the story,' remarked the Linnet.

'The what?' screamed the Water-rat.

'The moral ...'

'Well, really,' said the Water-rat, in a very angry manner, 'I think you should have told me that before you began. If you had done so, I certainly would not have listened to you; in fact, I should have said "Pooh" like the critic.'⁵¹¹

This subject is much more within Wilde's scope, and he tackles it superbly, conveying character in conversation, and by implication uncovering layer upon layer of hypocrisy and self-deception.

The hero of The Remarkable Rocket is just as disagreeable as the Miller. The Rocket's besetting sin is vanity, and the story shows the impregnability of genuine vanity, which cannot accept insult, but transforms it to compliment, and will not accept misfortune but always believes in its own over-weening importance, and organises all its ideas round this central concept. The Rocket was one of a display of fireworks to be let off in honour of the marriage of the Prince and Princess, though the Rocket believed they were married in his honour. The fireworks talked

⁵¹¹Ibid. p. 230-1

among themselves, establishing characters in a few words. The Rocket broke in:-

He spoke with a very slow, distinct voice, as if he were dictating his memoirs, and always looked over the shoulder of the person to whom he was talking. In fact, he had a most distinguished manner.⁵¹²

He related his history, inadvertently mispronouncing a word, which a Bengal Light ventured to correct:-

'Well, I said Pylotechnic,' answered the Rocket, in a severe tone of voice, and the Bengal Light felt so crushed that he began at once to bully the little squibs, in order to show that he was still a person of some importance.⁵¹³

The Rocket proudly demanded complete attention:-

'I am always thinking about myself, and I expect everybody else to do the same. That is what is called sympathy. It is a beautiful virtue, and I possess it in a high degree.'⁵¹⁴

He attempted to spread despondency because of imaginary disasters which might occur to the Prince and Princess later, and finally wept over them, which had the effect of damping his gunpowder. When the magnificent display was set off, he could not be lit, and next day was thrown away as 'a bad rocket', but in his mind he misheard this as 'grand rocket.' Landing in a ditch, he persuaded himself that it was a fashionable watering place, and

⁵¹²Tales p. 240.

⁵¹³Ibid. p. 241.

⁵¹⁴Ibid. p. 242.

tried to patronise the natives, a talkative Frog and a practical Duck who admired hard work. The Rocket pooh-poohed this:-

'I have no sympathy myself with industry of any kind, least of all with such industries as you seem to recommend. Indeed, I have always been of opinion that hard work is simply the refuge of people who have nothing whatever to do.'⁵¹⁵

At last, two little boys building a bonfire put him on top, lit it and went to sleep while the kettle boiled. The Rocket exploded in full sunlight with no one to see, his stick falling on a Goose.

'Good heavens!' cried the Goose. 'It is going to rain sticks; and she rushed into the water.

'I knew I should create a great sensation,' gasped the Rocket, and he went out.'⁵¹⁶

This gentle and penetrating satire of the quality of real egotism is vivid and entertaining, and like The Devoted Friend depends largely on dialogue for its effects.

The stories of A House of Pomegranates do not depend on dialogue to anything like the same extent. They deal more with problems of the soul than with problems of character. The decorative, ornate element of description which showed fitfully in the first collection is here elaborated and becomes very important. Although it contains only four tales, the collection is twice as long, and each story is more elaborate, in style, in plot and in symbolism, and only rarely is there a hint of a moral. The influence of Flaubert becomes more pronounced; the themes

⁵¹⁵Ibid. p. 252.

⁵¹⁶Tales, p. 258.

more exotic and the decoration often oriental. With this more intense style and the disappearance of the 'morals', the light wit of The Happy Prince largely vanishes also. The whole tone becomes more serious: although most of the tales in The Happy Prince ended in death, death now becomes more real, and cruel and bloody events occur. Suffering becomes a major theme, and the necessity of purgatorial experience. There is a strong vein of fatality, and a vein of great sadness: despite the Christian framework which is often present, the over-riding sense of doom gives an impression of paganism. Hope is present but not emphasised, and the absence of rewards for virtue in this world is made more terrible by the omission in general of hope of a next world. There is underlying personal feeling and a hint of self-identification with the evil and the suffering.

The Young King was published in December, 1888, only six months after The Happy Prince, and it is nearer to it in style and spirit than the later stories of A House of Pomegranates. In fact, it has several superficial similarities with The Happy Prince. Like the Happy Prince, the Young King goes through a time of loving pleasure and beauty to the exclusion of all else: like the Happy Prince he learns better, and cares about the poor and wretched in his dominions. The skeleton of the story seems like a political tract, but the style of telling it, with vivid visual pictures, quite transforms it.

The tale begins the night before the Young King's coronation.

He was brought up as a goatherd, but was the son of the Princess, whose fearful love story is hinted at, surrounded with mystery and romance. She lay dead in a deserted cemetery 'where it was said that another body was also lying, that of a young man of marvellous and foreign beauty, whose hands were tied behind him with a knotted cord, and whose breast was stabbed with many red wounds.'⁵¹⁷ This romantic, tragic background is very similar to that provided for Dorian Gray in the extended version. On his death-bed the old King had recognised the young goatherd, and he had been brought to the palace, where the wonderful beauty of his surroundings had had a marvellous effect on him. The Happy Prince had lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci⁵¹⁸, and the Young King now discovered a new world of delight in his palace, called Joyeuse. He was quite captivated by beauty:- 'like one who was seeking to find in beauty an anodyne from pain, a sort of restoration from sickness. ⁵¹⁹ His wild adoration of beautiful objects is exemplified, and his eagerness for more. Like Dorian Gray, he collected rare and costly materials, and most of all he was preoccupied by his coronation robes. He had given orders to spare no expense or labour to make these outstandingly beautiful. He felt perfectly happy:- 'Never before had he felt so keenly, or with such exquisite joy, the magic and mystery of beautiful things.'⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁷Tales p.5.

⁵¹⁸Ibid. p. 171.

⁵¹⁹Ibid. p. 6.

⁵²⁰Ibid. p. 10.

When he slept, however, he dreamt three dreams which were in stark contrast to the preceding richness. In the first, he watched pale, stunted people toiling over looms:- 'A horrible odour filled the place. The air was foul and heavy, and the walls dripped and streamed with damp.'⁵²¹ He spoke to a weaver and questioned him.

'In war,' answered the weaver, 'the strong make slaves of the weak, and in peace the rich make slaves of the poor. We must work to live, and they give us such mean wages that we die.'⁵²²

The plight of the weavers is described in unpleasant detail, and at last the King discovered that it was his own coronation robe they were weaving, and awoke with a loud cry.

His next dream is similar in theme, but well contrasted visually. The King was on a galley rowed by slaves, overseen by a richly clad negro master. They reached a bay and halted, and here is one of the sharp visual glimpses, only indirectly relevant, that make the story like a rich tapestry:-

Three Arabs mounted on wild asses rode out and threw spears at them. The master of the galley took a painted bow in his hand and shot one of them in the throat. He fell heavily into the surf, and his companions galloped away. A woman wrapped in a yellow veil followed slowly on a camel, looking back now and then at the dead body.⁵²³

A slave was sent down time and again to search for pearls. This time the Young King found he could not speak. On his last dive,

⁵²¹Ibid. p. 10-11.

⁵²²Ibid. p. 11.

⁵²³Tales p. 13-14.

The slave brought up a huge pearl, and died horribly.

And the master of the galley laughed, and reaching out, he took the pearl, and when he saw it he pressed it to his forehead and bowed. 'It shall be,' he said, 'for the sceptre of the Young King.'⁵²⁴

Again the King woke with a cry.

His last dream is also a contrast in its surroundings, for it takes place on the outskirts of a tropical forest. Again the visual description is like a moving picture:-

there he saw an immense multitude of men toiling in the bed of a dried-up river. They swarmed up the crag like ants. They dug deep pits in the ground and went down into them. Some of them cleft the rocks with great axes; others grabbed in the sand. They tore up the cactus by its roots, and trampled on the scarlet blossoms. They hurried about, calling to each other, and no man was idle.⁵²⁵

Over these workers Death and Avarice quarrelled. Avarice represents the greed of acquisitive man. She had three grains of corn, for one of which Death pleaded. On her first refusal, Death sent Ague to kill one third of the men. On her second, Death sent Fever to destroy more. Avarice pleaded:-

'thou art cruel. There is famine in the walled cities of India, and the cisterns of Samarcand have run dry. There is famine in the walled cities of Egypt, and the locusts have come up from the desert. The Nile has not over-flowed its banks, and the priests have nursed Isis and Osiris. Get thee gone to those who need thee, and leave me my servants.'⁵²⁶

⁵²⁴Ibid. p. 15

⁵²⁵Ibid. p. 16.

⁵²⁶Ibid. p. 18.

But still she would not surrender any of her corn:-

And Death laughed again, and he whistled through his fingers, and a woman came flying through the air. Plague was written upon her forehead, and a crowd of lean vultures wheeled round her. She covered the valley with her wings, and no man was left alive.⁵²⁷

The Young King learned that the men had been searching for rubies for his crown, and awoke a third time with a great cry.

Next day the King refused to wear his robes, and the nobles ridiculed him. More, as he rode to his coronation in his goat-herd's garments, the people complained:-

'Sir, knowest thou not that out of the luxury of the rich cometh the life of the poor? By your pomp we are nurtured, and your vices give us bread. To toil for a master is bitter, but to have no master to toil for is more bitter still. Thinkest thou that the ravens will feed us? And what cure hast thou for these things?'⁵²⁸

Even the bishop rebuked him, in the Biblical intonation that is part of the fascination of the tale:-

'Will thou take the leper for thy bedfellow, and set the beggar at thy board? Shall the lion do thy bidding, and the wild boar obey thee? Is not He who made misery wiser than thou art? ... And as for thy dreams, think no more of them. The burden of this world is too great for one man to bear, and the world's sorrow too heavy for one heart to suffer.'

'Sayest thou that in this house?'⁵²⁹

The Young King knelt to pray, and nobles rushed in, intent on killing him as unworthy to be king, when suddenly he was clothed by a

⁵²⁷Ibid. p. 19.

⁵²⁸Tales, p. 23.

⁵²⁹Ibid. p. 25.

miracle, and a great light shone from the altar.

The Young King is like the Happy Prince, but the Young King did not attempt distribution in the tale. He was concerned only with denouncing the causes of misery. It is a clear, ringing denunciation of evil in society, the kind of political statement Wilde made in The Soul of Man with more intellectual argument but less imaginative force. This is the supreme expression of Wilde's humanitarian feelings.

The Birthday of the Infanta has by far the slightest plot in the second collection, and is the most richly decorated. Wilde himself called it 'a study in black and silver', and considered it his best story 'in point of style'.⁵³⁰ A good deal of space is devoted to historical scene-setting: as in Dorian Gray and The Young King, the Infanta is the product of a tragic love affair, daughter of a beautiful mother who died very young. From the time of her death, the King had grieved madly, and refused all suggestions of a second alliance:- 'the King of Spain was already wedded to Sorrow, and ... though she was a barren bride he loved her better than Beauty'.⁵³¹ The young queen's death gives an early clue to one of the themes of the story: throughout, there is admiring description of the beauty and culture of the Spanish court, the acme of ritualised civilisation, and an implicit comparison with more gentle nature. The King helped to hasten the Queen's death, for 'he had failed to notice that the elaborate

⁵³⁰Mason; Bibliography 1914, p. 174.

⁵³¹Tales, p. 34

ceremonies by which he sought to please her did but aggravate the strange malady from which she suffered.⁵³² Seen as a whole, the story celebrates the pomp, culture and cruelty of the civilised court: the marriage of the King and Queen was marked by

the grand public entry into Madrid with the customary celebration of high mass at the Church of La Atocha, and a more than usually solemn auto-da-fe, in which nearly three hundred heretics, amongst whom were many Englishmen, had been delivered over to the secular arm to be burned.⁵³³

The joy and simplicity of the Dwarf, the child of Nature, form a severe criticism of the decadent civilisation of courtly Spain. He is liked by the birds for his kindness, and in contrast to the courtly entertainments given for the Infanta's birthday, he plans for her the natural amusements of forest life: 'He would bring her acorn-cups and dew-drenched anemones, and tiny glow-worms to be stars in the pale gold of her hair.'⁵³⁴ Rousseau's idea of the happy, noble savage is contrasted vividly with the elaborate civilisation which makes sport of him.

The Infanta is described as a copy of a famous portrait by Velasquez:-

Her robe was of gray satin, the skirt and the wide puffed sleeves heavily embroidered with silver, and the stiff corset studded with rows of fine pearls. Two tiny slippers with big pink rosettes peeped out beneath her dress as she walked. Pink and pearl was her great gauze fan, and in her hair, which like an aureole of faded gold stood out stiffly round her pale little face, she had a beautiful rose.⁵³⁵

⁵³² Tales, p. 35

⁵³³ Ibid. p. 35.

⁵³⁴ Ibid. p. 55.

⁵³⁵ Ibid. p. 33.

Six pages are devoted to describing the special entertainments provided for the Infanta's birthday, a mock bull-fight, a French tight-rope walker, an Italian puppet show, an African juggler, the solemn minuet 'performed by the dancing boys from the church of Nuestra Senora Del Pilar', the mad dancing of the gypsies and the antics of a bear and some Barbary apes. Much of this description, as Herzog points out, was 'local colour' provided by Gautier's Voyage en Espagne. Despite their very slight relevance, these events are described with a lavishness which does not intrude on the story, as do the random lists of objets d'art in Dorian Gray, but adds to its atmosphere.

The dancing of the Dwarf, however, formed the climax of delight: 'even at the Spanish Court, always noted for its cultivated passion for the horrible, so fantastic a little monster had never been seen.'⁵³⁶ Happy, and unconscious of his ugliness, he danced while the children roared with laughter at his deformity. He fell in love with the beautiful Infanta, who ordered him to dance again after her birthday feast. The Dwarf, delighted, believed that she loved him, and planned to take her to the forest and entertain her with pastoral delights. He crept into the palace in search of her, passing through wonderful chambers decorated chiefly in silver, gold and black. In the last, most beautiful room, he saw a little figure watching him, and Wilde's

⁵³⁶Tales, p. 44.

description of his slow realisation that the little monster he sees is his own reflection is brilliant and very tender. At last 'He crawled, like some wounded thing, into the shadow, and lay there moaning.'⁵³⁷

The children found him thus, and laughed even more at his antics of despair. The Infanta demanded that he should dance again, but the Chamberlain found he was dead of a broken heart.

And the little Infanta frowned, and her dainty rose-leaf lips curled in pretty disdain. 'For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts,' she cried, and she ran out into the garden.⁵³⁸

Like Dorian Gray, the Dwarf comes to recognise his own ugliness, and it breaks his heart. The story is a tragic version of the traditional story of The Lady and The Fool, for the Infanta is beautiful only externally. She is cruel and unfeeling, and the Dwarf's inner beauty can never be revealed to her: she is a childish fore-runner of Salome, beautiful, proud, aloof and obsessed with her own desires.

The Fisherman and His Soul is the longest and strangest of the tales: it is full of symbolism, and seems to tempt the reader to interpret the symbols. But its complexity is too great for any allegorical explanation, and perhaps Wilde's early plan grew more complex with the writing, so that now there can be no simple interpretation of the story. It is full of magic, of exotic things of

⁵³⁷Ibid. p. 62.

⁵³⁸Ibid. p. 64.

the Orient, and a strange pathos. Merle suggests that the Mermaid represents beauty, which can only be left for a different beauty, however chimerical, or that the Sea-folk represent a pagan conception of life which should not be condemned by Christianity but reconciled with it. Hartley traces much of the Oriental description to Flaubert's *Salamambo*.⁵³⁹, and Ojala compares the relation of the Fisherman and his Soul to that between Apollonius and St. Anthony in Flaubert's *La Tentation*.⁵⁴⁰

The poor Fisherman one day caught a beautiful mermaid in his net, who is described in Biblical terms almost reminiscent of the Song of Solomon:

Her hair was as a wet fleece of gold, and each each separate hair as a thread of fine gold in a cup of glass. Her body was as white ivory, and her tail was of silver and pearl. Silver and pearl was her tail, and the green weeds of the sea coiled round it; and like sea-shells were her ears, and her lips were like sea-coral.⁵⁴¹

He released her when she promised to sing for him and attract fish to his nets, but daily as she did so he loved her more and neglected his work. She said she could not love him unless he sent away his human soul. Full of love, he determined to do so, and went to the Priest, who cursed the Sea-folk and sensual love, and sternly sent him away. At last he went to a young Witch, who admired his beauty. She offered to perform all kinds of magic for him, but shuddered when he made his request. But she agreed to

⁵³⁹Hartley, p. 87.

⁵⁴⁰Ojala I, 175.

⁵⁴¹Tales, p. 68.

help him if he would dance with her at midnight at Withthes 'Sabbat'. This is the first time the importance of dancing is emphasised.⁵⁴²

As they danced, Satan was in their midst, and the Witch led the Fisherman to do homage. But in sudden terror he made the sign of the Cross, and all fled. The witch tried to escape, but he held her tight and forced from her the secret he was searching for. She gave him a knife with which he could sever his soul - in the shape of his shadow - from his body. The Soul pleaded not to be sent away, and above all: "If indeed thou must drive me from thee, send me not forth without a heart. The world is cruel, give me thy heart to take with me."⁵⁴³ But the Fisherman refused, and sent him away, the Soul promising to come to the shore once a year and call to him. The Fisherman descended to his Mermaid and the Soul went off alone.

After this point the story takes on a complex tri-partite structure; everything happens in threes, in the manner of traditional fairy stories. After the first year, the Soul called the Fisherman, and told him wonderful stories of his journeys in the East. Without a real body or a heart, the Soul was invincible and wicked, but his descriptions are exciting and vivid. He told of his journeys among the Tartars, and the battles he fought:

We fought with the Magadae, who are born old,
and grow younger and younger every year, and
die when they are little children; and with

⁵⁴²See Chapter 4.

⁵⁴³Tales, p. 38

the Laktroi who say that they are the sons of tigers, and paint themselves yellow and black; and with the Aurantes who bury their dead on the tops of trees, and themselves live in dark caverns lest the Sun, who is their god, should slay them; and with the Krkmnians who worship a crocodile, and give it earrings of green grass, and feed it with butter and fresh fowls; and with the Agazonbae, who are dog-faced; and with the Sibans, who have horse's feet, and run more swiftly than horses.⁵⁴⁴

He told of his search for the god of a city; twice the priest tried to deceive him, but the third time he saw it, the Mirror of Wisdom. "And I did a strange thing, but what I did matters not, for in a valley that is but a day's journey from this place have I hidden the Mirror of Wisdom."⁵⁴⁵ He offered the Fisherman all wisdom, but he preferred love, and returned to the sea.

After the second year the Soul told of his journeys in the South, and his dealings with a young Emperor who, filled with fear because he could not destroy the Soul, offered it half his wealth. But despite the magnificence that is shown to him, the Soul demanded the leaden ring the Emperor wore, and it was refused. "And I did a strange thing, but what I did matters not, for in a cave that is but a day's journey from this place have I hidden the Ring of Riches."⁵⁴⁶ But the Fisherman preferred love to riches, and went back to the sea.

The third year the Soul had a simpler tale - that of a dancing girl in an inn:-

Her face was veiled with a veil of gauze, but

⁵⁴⁴Tales p. 93.

⁵⁴⁵Ibid. p. 99.

⁵⁴⁶Ibid. p. 110.

her feet were naked. Naked were her feet, and they moved over the carpet like little white pigeons.⁵⁴⁷

The Fisherman was at last tempted; 'he remembered that the little Mermaid had no feet and could not dance'⁵⁴⁸, and, planning to return soon, he emerged from the sea and embraced his Soul. Again, they visited three places. In the first, the Soul tempted the Fisherman to steal, although afterwards he repented. In the second, the Soul told the Fisherman to smite a child, and he did so, again repenting afterwards. Finally the Soul tempted the Fisherman to murder a merchant who had given him hospitality, and when he had done it the Fisherman accused his Soul of evil. "'When thou didst send me forth into the world thou gavest me no heart, so I learned to do all these things and love them'"⁵⁴⁹

The Fisherman determined to pay no heed to his evil Soul, and to return to his beloved, but learnt that he could never send his Soul away again. He returned to the bay where he met the Mermaid, and for a year the Soul tempted him with evil which he resisted by the power of his love. So the Soul tried for another year to tempt him with good, attempting to excite humanitarian feelings in the Fisherman, who was too absorbed in love to listen. Finally the Soul begged his pity, and asked leave to enter his heart, and because the Soul had suffered alone without a heart the Fisherman relented; but the Soul could not enter, the heart so full of love.

⁵⁴⁷Ibid. p. 111.

⁵⁴⁸Ibid. p. 111.

⁵⁴⁹Tales p. 117

There was a cry of mourning, and the dead body of the Mermaid floated ashore. The Fisherman confessed to his dead love, and would not obey his Soul's exhortations to flee, but cried out, again in the language of the Authorised Version:

Love is better than wisdom, and more precious
than riches, and fairer than the feet of the
daughters of men. The fires cannot destroy
it, nor can the waters quench it.⁵⁵⁰

He was drowned, and his heart broke, letting the Soul enter.

In the epilogue, the Priest went to bless the sea, and found the bodies. He cursed the sea instead:

'And as for him who for love's sake forsook
God, and so lieth here with his leman slain
by God's judgement, take up his body and the
body of his leman, and bury them in the corner
of the Field of the Fullers, and set no mark above
them, nor sign of any kind, that none may know the
place of their resting. For accursed were
they in their lives, and accursed shall they be
in their deaths also.'⁵⁵¹

After the third year, the Priest went to the chapel to rebuke the people and found it full of strange, sweet flowers which made him speak of love instead. He learnt that the flowers came from the Fullers' Field, and next day he blessed the sea and all wild things:

All the things in God's world be blessed, and the
people were filled with joy and wonder. Yet
never again in the corner of the Fullers' Field
grew flowers of any kind, but the field remained
barren even as before. Nor came the Sea-folk
into the bay as they had been wont to do, for

⁵⁵⁰Tales p. 125.

⁵⁵¹Ibid. p. 127.

they went to another part of the sea.⁵⁵²

It is a marvellous and gripping story which does not easily supply an allegorical explanation but is amply rich as it stands.

With The Star-Child we return to the more sober, seeming realistic world of The Young King. It owes much to the Christian legend of St. Julian Hospitalier, which was retold by Flaubert.⁵⁵³ The debt is discernible in both plot and atmosphere.

It starts 'once upon a time', in true fairy tale fashion, and has a moral which combines the precepts of the two ladies in Kingsley's Water Babies:- "Do-as-you-would-be-done-by, and Be-done-by-as-you-did". The story begins with two poor woodcutters struggling home in frightful cold, and complaining "life is for the rich, and not for such as we are ... Injustice has parcelled out the world, nor is there equal division of aught save of sorrow."⁵⁵⁴ Suddenly they saw a very bright star fall nearby, and hunted to find the gold they believed would mark the spot. But when they reached it they found a sleeping child in a golden cloak. One wished to leave it, for he could hardly support his own children, but the other took pity on it. His wife was upset, and did not want the child, but he asked: "Into a house where a heart is hard cometh there not always a bitter wind?"⁵⁵⁵ Then she accepted the child and they brought it up as their own.

⁵⁵²Ibid. p. 129.

⁵⁵³Hartley, p. 84.

⁵⁵⁴Tales p. 136.

⁵⁵⁵Ibid, p. 139.

Every year the Star-Child became more beautiful. 'Yet did his beauty work him evil. For he grew proud, and cruel, and selfish.'⁵⁵⁶ He had the same unhealthy, destructive love of beauty as had Dorian Gray and the Young King: 'he was as one enamoured of beauty' and like the cruel Infanta, 'would mock at the weakly and ill-favoured, and make jest of them'.⁵⁵⁷ One day he threw stones at an old beggarwoman, who revealed herself as his mother: when he found out, he despised her, drove her away and refused to kiss her: '"Nay," said the Star-Child, "but thou art too foul to look at, and rather would I kiss the adder or the toad than thee."⁵⁵⁸ When she had gone he returned to his companions who rejected him because 'his face was as the face of a toad, and his body was scaled like an adder.'⁵⁵⁹ He realised this was a punishment for his cruelty, and resolved to find his mother and seek forgiveness. The animals would not help him search, because he had ill-treated them, and men drove him away because he was so repulsive.

For the space of three years he wandered over the world, and in the world there was neither love nor loving-kindness nor charity for him, but it was even such a world as he had made for himself in the days of his great pride.⁵⁶⁰

He came to a city and was sold as a slave to an old magician, who set him three tasks; the triple motif recurs again. He had first to fetch a piece of white gold from a wood, which like his

⁵⁵⁶Tales, p. 140.

⁵⁵⁷Ibid. p. 141.

⁵⁵⁸Ibid. p. 146.

⁵⁵⁹Ibid. p. 146.

⁵⁶⁰Ibid. p. 149.

former character was beautiful externally but cruel inside. He looked in vain for the gold, and saved a Hare from a trap, whereupon the Hare showed him the gold. At the gate of the city a leper appealed to him for money: out of pity he gave him the gold, and was cruelly punished. The next day he was sent for yellow gold; again the Hare helped him, the leper begged the gold and the Star-Child was punished. The third day, in search of red gold the same adventures befell him, but as he entered the city the people hailed him as king. His beauty was restored, but he refused the crown, still determined to seek his mother. But suddenly he saw the beggarwoman and the leper, and he cried and kissed his mother's feet, and begged the leper to intercede for him for forgiveness.

They told him to rise, and they became a King and Queen, revealing themselves as his parents. He was made King, and ruled justly.

Nor would he suffer any to be cruel to bird or beast, but taught love and loving-kindness and charity, and to the poor he gave bread, and to the naked he gave raiment, and there was peace and plenty in the land.

Yet ruled he not long, so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space of three years he died. And he whom came after him ruled evilly.⁵⁶¹

The human predicament is starkly stated here: each man must work out his own salvation. The basic theme of this story, as of so many of the others, is the contrast of physical and spiritual beauty, and the infinite superiority of the latter. The tales lend credence to Wilde's assertion of the moral of Dorian Gray, which, except to the prejudiced, is already obvious, for Dorian Gray is yet another variation on the same theme.

⁵⁶¹Tales, p. 161.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Theatre

Part I Lyrical Drama

There are several reasons for treating one side of Wilde's drama immediately after the Tales and the poems in prose, reasons of similarity of style, tone, symbolism, influence and origin. Wilde's drama is generally divided into two kinds, with the four comedies on one side and Salome on the other. Clearly, Salome is a different kind of play. But Salome is not alone: there are fragments and accounts of several other plays which seem more truly related to A House of Pomegranates than to Lady Windermere's Fan and The Importance of Being Earnest. These plays are basically more concerned with Drama and decorated style than the comedies, and contain no witty epigrams and paradoxes.

Of course, there are similarities: the dramatic plots of Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance and An Ideal Husband are fundamentally akin to the lyrical dramas in their preoccupations, but there is a difference in kind. Arthur Ransome, one of the earliest critics of Wilde, has best defined the difference:- 'Wilde delighted in laughter, but also in a quality in emotion almost hostile to laughter, a quality that I can best describe as magnificence'. He goes on:- 'It is possible that we owe The Importance of Being Earnest to the fact that the Censor prevented Sarah Bernhardt from playing Salome at the Palace Theatre. For though Wilde had the secret of a wonderful laughter, he preferred

to think of himself as a person with magnificent dreams. He would rather have been a magician than a jester. The well-dressed modern plays starved too many of his intimate desires. He was unable to clothe magnificent emotions in evening dress.' (1)

P.P. Howe compares 'the group of plays which Wilde wrote out of his cleverness to please the managers' with 'the group of plays which he wrote to please himself.' (2) But both groups of plays demonstrate the fundamental qualities of Wilde as playwright, a great sense of 'theatre', technical mastery of situation, with dramatic exits and entrances, and clever preparation of effects, and on the other hand his typical preoccupation with words, used in each group for very different ends. Like the fairy tales, the lyrical drama is characterised by decorative style, 'magnificence', while the social comedies are distinguished by wit and precision of language. In its own style, each introduced something new in its emphasis on style in a theatre where playwrights had forgotten how to use words.

To see the extent of Wilde's renovation of language in his different styles, we need only compare the opening of one of the Nineties' greatest theatrical successes, Arthur Wing Pinero's The Second Mrs. Tanqueray with the openings of The Importance of Being Earnest and Salome. Like Earnest, Mrs. Tanqueray is set in the present; like Salome, it is a drama, not a social comedy. The comparison of the openings gives an idea at least of Wilde's

(1) Ransome, pp. 153 - 154.

(2) P.P. Howe, Dramatic Portraits, 1913, p. 102.

superiority of technique in introducing theme or character. The Second Mrs. Tanqueray opens with an after-dinner conversation:-

Misquith: Aubrey, it is a pleasant yet dreadful fact to contemplate, but it's nearly fifteen years since I first dined with you. You lodged in Piccadilly in those days, over a hat-shop. Jayne, I met you at that dinner, and Cayley Drummle.

Jayne: Yes, yes. What a pity it is that Cayley isn't here tonight.

Aubrey: Confound the old gossip! His empty chair has been staring us in the face all through dinner. I ought to have told Morse to take it away.

Misquith: Odd, his sending no excuse.

Aubrey: I'll walk round to his lodgings later on and ask after him.

Misquith: I'll go with you.

Jayne: So will I.

Aubrey: (Opening the cigar cabinet). Doctor, it's useless to tempt you, I know . . . I particularly wished Cayley Drummle to be one of us tonight. You two fellows and Cayley are my closest, my best friends -

Misquith: My dear Aubrey! (3)

This conversation is unremarkable as regards style, and very obvious in technique. Compare the careless insouciance with which Wilde introduces Earnest:-

Algernon: Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

Lane: I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

Algernon: I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately - anyone can play accurately - but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

(3) The Second Mrs. Tanqueray, pp. 2 - 3.

Lane: Yes, sir.

Algernon: And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

Lane: Yes, sir.

Algernon: (Inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa): Oh! . . . by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

Lane: Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

Algernon: Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

Lane: I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first rate brand. (4)

Salome begins with the verbal creation of atmosphere, and introduces at once the dominant theme of the moon:-

Le Jeune Syrien: Comme la princesse Salomé est belle ce soir!

Le Page d'Hérodiad: Regardez la lune. La lune a l'air très étrange. On dirait une femme qui sort d'un tombeau. Elle ressemble à une femme morte. On dirait qu'elle cherche des morts.

Le Jeune Syrien: Elle a l'air très étrange. Elle ressemble à une petite princesse qui porte un voile jaune, et a des pieds comme des petites colombes blanches . . . On dirait qu'elle danse.

Le Page d'Hérodiad: Elle est comme une femme morte. Elle va très lentement. (5)

As lyrical drama, Salome is supreme, but with Salome we can

(4) Earnest, pp. 1 - 2.

(5) Salome, pp. 5 - 6.

also consider the incomplete plays La Sainte Courtisane and The Florentine Tragedy. Wilde's first youthful plays, Vera and The Duchess of Padua contain elements which point to the dual development of his dramatic talent. Like the later lyrical drama, they are remote in time and place from English society in the Nineties. Immature and melodramatic as Vera is, it already shows his grasp of the drama of contrast - the Court and the Nihilists, the wit of Prince Paul and the rhetoric of Vera and the Czarevitch. The characterisation is simple but sometimes effective; the Czar, for instance, fed and kept alive by his fear of the people, is an impressive character, with a hint of the Herod of Salome. The conversation of Prince Paul and his cronies, out of place in this drama of passion and politics, gives a first indication of the sophisticated, witty dialogue of the later comedies.

The Duchess of Padua, a pseudo-Shakespearean tragedy, is more fully in the vein of the lyrical drama. It is patterned in its action, and like Vera is a play of Love, Revenge and Death. As Howe points out, the pattern is 'the same theme of double recoil' as Salome.⁽⁶⁾ Guido recoils from the Duchess whom he loves when she murders the Duke for his sake: she in turn recoils from him and has him arrested for the murder. In Salome, the princess loves Iokanaan and, scorned, has him killed; Herod desires Salome and recoils to order her death.

The two early dramas are of little importance, but when we turn to the more mature plays and projected plays in this genre

(6) Howe, p. 106.

we find that more and more they are not plays where the action springs from the characters of the participants, but rather jewelled, stylised designs. Like Dorian Gray, but far more so, they are 'essays in decorative art'. Only in this sense can they be understood and appreciated. They belong to a genre of their own, with affinities to Maeterlinck's symbolist drama. Often they illustrate ideas originally expressed in parables or poems in prose and developed into patterned, stylised dramas, heavy with inevitability, rituals on a theme. The themes are constant - love, desire and death.

A ten year gap separates Vera and The Duchess of Padua from Salome, La Sainte Courtisane and A Florentine Tragedy. The early part of these ten years was largely devoted to journalism, but Wilde's writing gathered momentum at the end of the 1880's. He produced the fairy tales, Dorian Gray and Intentions, and when he came to drama again he had achieved well-founded confidence in himself, a mature position of critical awareness, and a mastery of style in various genres. His first new theatrical venture was Lady Windermere's Fan, and that play demonstrates his advance in dramatic technique. Salome was written in the same year, and La Sainte Courtisane and A Florentine Tragedy were written almost contemporaneously with An Ideal Husband.⁽⁷⁾

La Sainte Courtisane and A Florentine Tragedy both developed in Wilde's typical conversational manner. They were told as

(7) See Letters, p. 427.

parables and as prose poems, and each illustrates and seems to develop from one of Wilde's persistent themes. Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree told the skeleton of the story of La Sainte Courtisane to Hesketh Pearson, who quotes it in his Life of Oscar Wilde.

It starts: 'It is true: when you convert someone else to your own faith, you cease to believe in it yourself. Have you not heard the story of Honorius the Hermit?' (8) He goes on to outline the story of Myrrhina the royal courtesan, who came into the desert out of curiosity to overcome Honorius' resistance and make him love her, because she had heard of his great holiness and contempt for the world founded on his greater love of God. But Honorius taught her to love God, and asked her to confess her sins. Her recital made him envious of all he had missed, and he determined to go to Alexandria. She remained in the desert. 'She, I regret to say, died of starvation. He, I fear, died of debauchery. That is what comes of trying to convert people.' (9)

The portion of the manuscript which survived the pillage of Wilde's house and his own absentmindedness is much less than the whole play. / An atmosphere of expectation is created by the talk of two desert dwellers, and the beginning of Myrrhina's temptation of Honorius. She has the accents of Salome: 'How strangely he spake to me, and with what scorn did he regard me. I wonder why he spake to me so strangely.' Her speeches are laden, like the Tales, with exotic jewels, perfumes and fruits, here used dramatically

(8) Pearson, p. 238.

(9) Ibid. p. 239.

and with power. The fragment ends:

Myrrhina: Come with me, Honorius, and I will clothe
you in a tunic of silk. I will smear
your body with myrrh and put spikenard
on your hair. I will clothe you in
hyacinth and put honey in your mouth.
Love -

Honorius: There is no love but the love of God.

As it stands, the situation is very similar to Salome's
temptation of Iokanaan. Honorius is less strongly pictured.
Wilde admitted to Charles Ricketts in 1894:

She continues to say beautiful things, but the
Anchorite always remains mute. I admit her words
are quite unanswerable. I think I shall have to
indicate his replies by stars or asterisks. (10)

La Sainte Courtisane was one of the plays he wished to rewrite in
France after his release from prison, but he could not find the
power: 'Alas, she no longer says marvellous things, the robbers
have buried her white body and carried away her jewels . . .' (11)
But he had great enthusiasm for the plays he wrote in his decorated,
ritualistic manner, and seemed to think of them much more highly
than of the comedies. The lawsuit with Queensberry, he points out
to Lord Alfred Douglas in De Profundis, interrupted 'making beautiful,
coloured, musical things such as Salome, and the Florentine Tragedy,
and La Sainte Courtisane'. (12)

More of A Florentine Tragedy is extant, and it was completed
by T. Sturge Moore, to allow of its performance as a one-act play.

(10) Charles Ricketts, Oscar Wilde: Recollections by Jean Paul Raymond
and Charles Ricketts, 1932, p. 40.

(11) Ricketts, p. 48.

(12) Letters, p. 492.

It is characteristic of Wilde's method that to 'complete' the play, Sturge Moore had to provide not an end but a beginning. A Florentine Tragedy is written in blank verse, which is not of a uniform quality but is a considerable improvement on The Duchess of Padua. It still has a Shakespearean ring:-

Nay, you are caught in such a cunning vice
That nothing will avail you, and your life
Narrowed into a single point of shame
Ends with that shame and ends most shamefully. (13)

Again Pearson provides an account of the completed plot, this time related by Robert Ross, and again we find that basically the story illustrates a pet theme:

Most people love beauty because their neighbours
love the same beauty. They admire strength
because everyone does so. Very few among us
have the courage openly to set up our own standard
of values and abide by it. You remember what
happened to the Merchant of Florence? No? Then
I will tell you. (14)

Simone, a merchant of Florence, married his wife Bianca for her housewifely qualities, and they had an uneventful married life. A young prince, Guido, met the wife one day and found her beautiful; while she blossomed in his interest. One day he was present when the merchant returned: Simone was thrilled to see him, and offered to sell him any of his goods. The Prince agreed that the merchant could state his own terms, and Simone declared his gratitude. Guido suggested 'What if I asked for your wife?' Simone replied

(13) Salome, pp. 112 - 113.

(14) Pearson, p. 191.

that she was only good for a housekeeper, but Guido insisted on her beauty. After a while Simone realised that Guido and Bianca were in love, and the men began to fight. Bianca told Guido to kill her husband, but Simone overpowered him and killed him. Then comes the moment of recognition for which the whole tale has been a preparation:-

Bianca: Did you not tell me you were so strong? ^{Why}

Simone: Did you not tell me you were beautiful? ^{Why} (15)

As the style has changed from Biblical prose to blank verse, so the setting has moved from the Orient to Italy. The movement of the play is one of cumulative tension, from the entrance of the husband to the death of the lover, and the mutual discovery of husband and wife. But it is inferior to Salome, especially in its often apparent intention which is separate from the action, whereas in Salome we are not conscious of an external direction of the action.

There were other plays conceived in conversation and composed in part in prison, but never written down. These include a drama, The Cardinal of Arragon, a sordid tale of love and illicit passion, a play about Moses and Pharoah, and another Biblical subject, Ahab and Jezebel.⁽¹⁶⁾ There is a recorded poem in prose on this subject printed as appendix in Vyvyan Holland's Son of Oscar Wilde.⁽¹⁷⁾

(15) Salome, p. 114.

(16) See Letters, p. 649 n.

(17) Pp. 261 - 264.

Wilde's interest was in Jezebel, another Salome figure:

She was wrapped from head to foot in a robe of woven gold, and long strands of emeralds coiled about her, flashing and glinting in the twilight like green snakes at play. Her long pale hands were circled with gems, and she looked like some marvellous idol in her gorgeous and deadly beauty.

Ahab the king wished to fulfil her every desire; she sighed for Naboth's vineyard. Ahab asked Naboth to sell it to him, but Naboth, a good-looking youth, refused, for it had been in his family for generations. Later, Jezebel called Naboth, and made him sit with her on the throne, drink with her from the king's cup and kiss her, all against his conscience. Then she called Ahab, who in blind rage killed Naboth. Then he repented bitterly:

And his grief ate into his very soul, and his lamentations filled the air. But Jezebel, the Queen, smiled a strange, sweet smile and said, with her voice which was like the sighing of the summer breeze at evening, so low and soft was it:

'Nay, king, thy lamentations are foolish and thy tears are vain; rather shouldst thou laugh, for now the vineyard where the grass is green and where the doves fly is mine own.' (18)

Ricketts declared also that he contemplated a drama on Queen Elizabeth I,⁽¹⁹⁾ and described Wilde's fascination with Tudor history. All these subjects are far removed from the world of the social comedies, and what Wilde might have achieved in this entirely different dramatic genre is impossible to assess. But we have one completed play in this genre, Salome, which has had the greatest European success of any British play.

(18) Son of Oscar Wilde, p. 264.

(19) Ricketts, p. 16.

'Take Maeterlinck and Flaubert from Wilde's Salome, and what remains?' There is no question that we must decide this, for it was Oscar Wilde who posed the question.⁽²⁰⁾ It is a misleading question, probably purposely so. True, Flaubert's Hérodiade gave a great deal of local colour to the play, and Maeterlinck was a technical influence. 'He introduced Wilde to the subtleties of symbolistic play writing, and many a technical finesse employed in Salome is derived from Maeterlinck, especially from La Princesse Maleine'.⁵⁶² This simple, powerful language was a natural gift to Wilde, writing in a language that was not his own. Flaubert's influence was much less direct than many critics have assumed. He had tackled the same subject as Wilde, in the long short story Hérodiade, but the differences are very much more noticeable than the similarities. Hérodiade is a tale which tries to assemble a great many diverse elements, to provide a coloured, varied tale. We are shown in detail Jews and Samaritans, Pharisees and Saducees, Essenes and Nazarenes, and Herod is presented as at the mercy of his own character, of his wife, of each of the warring factions of the Jews, and in great fear of the Procursul Vitellius and his retinue; obsessed by politics and power, and also, but less personally than in Wilde's play, with the imprisoned prophet Iokanaan. In every way Flaubert presents the complexity, the intricate influences at work openly or under cover to move the

(20) Graham Robertson, Time Was, 1931, p. 136.

⁵⁶² Ojala, I, 176.

frightened, ageing Tetrarch: Wilde, on the other hand, rejects every possible detail, cuts extraneous interests to a bare minimum, and concentrates the atmosphere, the theme and the action to a quintessence of lust and erotic desires, surrounded by fear and the inescapability of an implacable destiny. For instance, in Hérodiade, it is the ascetic, long-haired Essene Phanuel who prophesies the coming death of a man of importance by studying the stars: in Salome, Herod himself senses the wings of the Angel of Death, and it is Iokanaan who voices the prophecy. The number of characters is ruthlessly reduced in Salome - no Roman visitors, no extraneous matters intrude, and all the characters are caught up in the sensual, erotic movement of the play. Flaubert may have had some influence in his other works: Salammbô and the Temptation of St. Anthony: The Queen of Sheba's seductive attacks on St. Anthony are nearer to the mood of Salome than anything in the Hérodiade.

More directly important in the creation of Salome seems to be a twin influence - Gustave Moreau's famous paintings of Salome, and Des Esseintes' meditations upon them in A Rebours. Broad accounts that Wilde often quoted Des Esseintes:

Many a time he simply repeated Huysmans' words: 'She is nearly naked. In the whirl of the dance the veils are unloosed, the shawls are fallen to the ground and only jewels clothe her body. The tiniest of girdles spans her hips; between her breasts, a jewel glitters' ⁵⁶³

Huysmans describes the two paintings in the art-literature manner of Pater's famous account of the Mona Lisa. He interprets and

muses upon the two aspects of Salome, the seductive harlot described above and the haughty, majestic near goddess of the other painting:-

She had become, as it were, the symbolic incarnation of undying Lust, the Goddess of immortal Hysteria, the accursed Beauty exalted above all other beauties by the catalepsy that hardens her flesh and steels her muscles, the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning, like the Helen of ancient myth, everything that approaches her, ⁵⁶⁴ everything that sees her, everything that she touches.

This is Wilde's Salome.

But neither of these sources directly provides the basic theme of Wilde's drama, the lust of Salome for the chaste body of the prophet. As Ojala points out, perhaps the beginnings of this conception can be found in Mallarmé's Hérodiade, where Salome is presented thus:-

J'aime l'horreur d'être vierge et je veux
Vivre parmi l'effroi que me font mes cheveux
Pour, le soir, retirée en ma couche, reptile
Inviolé sentir en la clair inutile
Le froid scintillement de ta pâle clarté
Toi qui te meurs, toi qui brûles de chasteté ⁵⁶⁵
Nuit blanche de glaçons et de neige cruelle!

Hartley confirms that Wilde knew and quoted this poem. Ojala considers that Mallarmé's view was Wilde's final conception of Salome: ⁵⁶⁶ he had envisaged her as completely abandoned, or as almost asexual; 'the horror of being a virgin' provides a new frisson in the quest for 'different' sensations.

It is significant that all the suggested influences are French; for of course Wilde chose to write his play in French. Airily he

⁵⁶⁴ A Rebours, penguin classics, p. 66.

⁵⁶⁵ Mallarmé, Poésies p. 64.

⁵⁶⁶ Ojala, I, 176.

sent it to friends with such careless comments as: 'my strange venture in a tongue that is not my own, but that I love as one loves an instrument of music on which one has not played before.' 567 He described it in more dignified fashion to Edmund Gosse as: 'my first venture to use for art that subtle instrument of music, the French tongue.' 568 To speculations as to why he wrote it in French there can be no definite answer; it may have been his desire to become accepted in France as an artist in a genre which was much less foreign there than in England. Ransome suggests:

Wilde had talked of the play for some time before he wrote it, and talked of it chiefly in Paris. Frenchmen had applauded the fragments he recited. It was to them that he wished to show it when completed. This is the reason why it shares with Vathek and The Grammont Memoirs the distinction of being a work written in French by an Englishman of genius. 569

The controversy over the quality of Wilde's French is profitless: the disagreement, which has occupied critics almost to the exclusion of any serious consideration of the play, is summed up in the Letters. 570

Wilde was consciously making something new in the creation of Salome.

If I were asked of myself as a dramatist, I would say that my unique position was that I had taken the Drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the Lyric or the Sonnet, while enriching the characterisation of the stage, and enlarging - at any rate in the case of Salome - its artistic horizon. 571

567 Letters, p. 330.

568 Ibid. p. 331.

569 P. 158.

570 Pp 305n - 306.

571 Letters, p. 589.

The unique quality of *Salome* has always been recognised, particularly because of its contrast with Wilde's English comedies.

That *Salome* is a work of art is scarcely to be disputed. Within the chosen style it is perfectly achieved, an artistic whole, without a phrase out of key. It is the work not of the man who wrote the comedies, but of the mind that produced *The Sphinx*. It is a masterpiece in sadism. 572

Sarah Bernhardt recognised the ritualistic quality when Wilde first read it to her: 'Mais, c'est héraldique, on dirait une fresque', and she recognised immediately the importance of the language: 'Le mot doit tomber comme une perle sur une disque de cristal, pas de mouvements rapides, des gestes stylisés.' 573 This importance of the language in *Salome* lends credence to the suggestion that it was not originally intended for the stage, despite its phenomenal success there.

The most striking quality of *Salome* is its total atmosphere. A contemporary judgement declared: 'In *Salome* everything is twisted to create an atmosphere of eroticism and sensuality. That is the aim of the play and nothing else.' 574 Holbrook Jackson declared:

He endeavours, often with success, to stimulate feelings that are usually suppressed, by means of what is strange and rare in art and luxury . . . The whole work is coloured by a hunger for sensation that has all the sterility of an excessive civilisation. 575

572 Broad, p. 105.

573 Ricketts, p. 53.

574 A. Baughan, quoted Ingleby *Wilde*, p. 196.

575 *The Eighteen Nineties*, pp. 83 - 84.

But such general judgements are not final; they are not even necessarily derogatory, for Wilde's aim might well have been to depict 'the sterility of an excessive civilisation'. It is necessary to investigate the play, to see how Wilde obtains these effects.

Most of the scene-setting is done verbally, on a moonlit terrace, where soldiers are looking down on Herod's banqueting hall. Before any of the court characters appears, we see them through the eyes of the soldiers. Some of the soldiers are indifferent: the young Syrian Captain of the Guard is in love with Salome. Before they enter, we know that Salome is very beautiful and very pale tonight, that Queen Herodias is magnificently gowned, that Herod is drinking below. In contrast, Iokanaan introduces himself; his voice suddenly rises from the cistern where he is imprisoned, in ecstatic prophecy. Then the soldiers desultorily discuss him too. Even the executioner, Naaman, is brought to our attention and explained before the action proper begins.

But the manner of the introduction is what most of all establishes the terrifying mood of the play. From the first it is fraught with doom. The effect is achieved by constant simple recognition, and remarks repeated and repeated. First there is the moon, constantly described and admired by the characters, until there is a sense in the audience that all the characters are struck by a strange moon madness. Then two ideas, usually linked, occur again and again:-

Le Jeune Syrien: Comme la princesse Salomé est
belle ce soir!

Le Page d'Hérodias: Vous la regardez toujours.
 Vous la regardez trop. Il
 ne faut pas regarder les gens de
 cette façon.⁵⁷⁶ . Il peut arriver
 un malheur.

In this Syrian palace it is almost impossible to avoid gazing in fascination at some object of admiration, and it presages deadly danger. Herod too is looking at Salome.⁵⁷⁷ Again and again the young page stresses that the Syrian is looking at Salome too much, that there is danger.⁵⁷⁸ Salome enters, and the Syrian asks her to be seated: the page tries yet once more: 'Oh! qu'est-ce qu'il va arriver? Je suis sûr qu'il va arriver un malheur.'⁵⁷⁹ But it is useless: the characters are so obsessed by their visions that they seem not even to hear the warnings. Shortly after, as Salome courts Iokanaan, the young Syrian kills himself. He had tried to prevent Salome looking at Iokanaan, entreated her to go back to the feast: 'Pardon, princesse, mais si vous n'y retourniez pas il pourrait arriver un malheur.'⁵⁸⁰

But Salome was determined to see Iokanaan with her own eyes. She bribed the young Syrian with the same desire; she promised that she would look at him next day, and maybe smile. Iokanaan is brought up and Salome is captivated the moment she sees him, while he refuses to look at her: lust of the eyes is emphasised almost hysterically:-

⁵⁷⁶ Salome, pp. 6 - 7.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 7.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid. pp. 7, 12, 14, 15.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 20.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 17.

Salomé: ... Je veux le regarder de près.
 Le Jeune Syrien: Non, non, princesse!
 Salomé: Il faut que je le regarde de près.
 Le Jeune Syrien: Princesse! Princesse!
 Iokanaan: Qui est cette femme qui me regarde?
 Je ne veux pas qu'elle me regarde. ⁵⁸¹

Seeing Iokanaan rouses Salome to a lyrical frenzy of desire, and a yearning to kiss his mouth.

The same theme recurs almost at once; on Herod's entrance he is searching for Salome. Herodias replies: 'Il ne faut pas la regarder. Vous la regardez toujours!' ⁵⁸² He expresses regret at the young Syrian's death, but recalls that he had looked langourously at Salome:-

Hérode: ... En effet, j'ai trouvé qu'il l'avait un peu trop regardée.

Hérodias: Il y en a d'autres qui la regardent trop. ⁵⁸³

Again and again Herodias scolds him, while he seems not to hear. He loses touch with the conversation, again gazing at Salome:-

Hérode: ... J'ai oublié ce que je voulais savoir.

Hérodias: Vous regardez encore ma fille. Il ne faut pas la regarder. Je vous ai déjà dit cela.

Hérode: Vous ne dites que cela.

Hérodias: Je le redis. ⁵⁸⁴

In his passion Herod asks Salome to dance, and swears he will give

⁵⁸¹ Salome, p. 25.

⁵⁸² Ibid. p. 35.

⁵⁸³ Ibid. p. 38.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid. pp. 54 - 55.

her any reward if she will. After the dance, and his dismay at Salome's request for Iokanaan's head, Herod admits:

Eh! bien, oui. Je vous ai regardée pendant toute la soirée. Votre beauté m'a troublé. Votre beauté m'a terriblement troublé, et je vous ai trop regardée. Mais je ne le ferai plus. Il ne faut regarder ni les choses ni les personnes. Il ne faut regarder que dans les miroirs. Car les miroirs ne nous montrent que des masques . . . 585

Other refrains also echo throughout the play: the princess is very pale tonight; the Tetrarch is sombre; and the most terrible is Salome's cry to Iokanaan:- 'Laisse-moi baiser ta bouche.' 586 This she repeats, at first pleading, and rising to a frenzy of desire which makes her oblivious of all else:-

Le Premier Soldat: Princesse, le jeune capitaine vient de se tuer.

Salomé: Laisse-moi ⁵⁸⁷baiser ta bouche, Iokanaan.

When at last she is given the head, she repeats again savagely and with pain:- 'Oui, je baiserais ta bouche, Iokanaan. Je te l'ai dit, n'est-ce pas? Je te l'ai dit'. 588 Wilde worked on these recurrent themes and phrases with great care:

The Ballad is the true origin of the romantic Drama, and the true predecessors of Shakespeare are not the tragic writers of the Greek or Latin stage, from Aeschylus to Seneca, but the ballad-writers of the Border . . . The recurring phrases of Salome, that bind it together like a piece of music with recurring motifs, are, and were to me, the artistic equivalent of the refrains of old ballads. 589

585 Salome, p. 70.

586 Ibid. p. 30.

587 Ibid. p. 31 (three times), p. 32 (twice), p. 33 (four times).

588 Ibid. p. 78.

589 Letters, p. 590.

So much is done with words that the moments where there are no words are breathless with tension. We do not see or hear the death of Iokanaan, which takes place offstage, in the cistern. We share Salome's suspense, the terror of the soldiers who will not fetch the head: and then - no words - no character appears, just the long arm of the executioner is raised above the cistern, bearing aloft the head of Iokanaan on a silver shield. This is a visual dramatic touch easily comparable in its impact with the famous entry of Jack in full mourning in the second act of The Importance of Being Earnest.

The language also creates a strange sequence of images, linking Salome, the moon and Iokanaan. The moon is variously compared to a princess in a yellow veil, to white doves, to dancing feet, to a silver flower, to a virgin, to a little princess, to clouds of muslin, to a naked, unchaste woman. Salome is pale, compared to a white rose in a mirror of silver, to a silver flower, a white flower, and her hands are like doves or white butterflies, her naked feet white doves or white flowers: Herod eventually compares her to the moon itself. And Salome's lyrical descriptions of Iokanaan include images of ivory and silver, white roses, virginity, the feet of dawn, the breast of the moon, so that all these pictures, essentially images of purity, grow to have a complex, erotic significance, whose basis is impurity.

The characters are revealed in the way they see the moon, which dominates the piece. The apprehensive page of Herodias sees her as a dead woman rising from a tomb, as a woman in a winding sheet

searching for a dead man. The love-struck young Syrian sees her as his idea of Salome, like a little princess with a yellow veil and silver feet, or a princess with amber eyes smiling through muslin veils. Salome sees the moon as a cold, chaste virgin:

Que c'est bon de voir la lune! Elle ressemble
à une petite pièce de monnaie. On dirait une
toute petite fleur d'argent. Elle est froide
et chaste, la lune. . . . Je suis sûre qu'elle
est vierge. Elle a la beauté d'une vierge . . .
Oui, elle est vierge. Elle ne s'est jamais
souillée. Elle ne s'est jamais donnée aux
hommes, comme les autres Déesses. ⁵⁹⁰

The rambling, lustful Herod sees her as a mad woman, seeking lovers, quite naked, drunk. The prosaic Herodias replies: 'Non. La lune ressemble à la lune, c'est tout.' ⁵⁹¹

Finally, when all is over, and Salome is embracing the corpse's head, Herod in agony of fear and disgust wishes to destroy all the lights, to put out the moon along with the torches. Salome continues her unearthly chant in the darkness when a huge cloud covers the moon, and when a moonbeam falls on her, Herod turns and orders her death. Even Salome's death, when she is crushed beneath the soldiers' shields, is prepared for: Iokanaan cried out in the course of his cursing: 'Que les capitaines de guerre la percent de leurs épées, qu'ils l'écrasent sous leurs boucliers.' ⁵⁹²

In objecting to Beardsley's illustrations to the play Wilde summed up his chief characters:- 'My Herod is like the Herod of

⁵⁹⁰Salome, p. 16.

⁵⁹¹Ibid. p. 35.

⁵⁹²Ibid. p. 51.

Gustave Moreau - wrapped in his jewels and sorrows. My Salome is a mystic, the sister of Salammbô, a Sainte Thérèse who worships the moon."⁵⁹³ His play is a tour de force, depicting the fascination and evil of obsessive lust.

⁵⁹³ Ricketts, pp. 51 - 52.

Part II The comedies

The conventional criticism of Wilde's comedies before The Importance of Being Earnest takes the form of a reluctant demonstration of a dichotomy between plot and dialogue: the plays are worthwhile and funny only because of the dialogue, which is often at odds with a melodramatic plot centring on a moral issue.⁵⁹⁴ But there is a good deal more to the plays than this. As I have already suggested, Wilde's creative works almost always have a dual aim, very often conflicting aims. He wished to create masterpieces of form and style, and he wished to justify and prove his philosophy of life by showing it in relation to the existent world on every level. In the first three comedies, Wilde found in conventional plots and situations opportunities for raising moral questions which interested him: he presents these situations to his aesthetic philosopher, in social life the dandy, and tests his capacity to deal with them.

This explanation does not exhaust the scope of the comedies: in many ways equally important is the way in which the moral attitudes of 'good' characters are laid bare and criticised, but certainly a fundamental question is: what does the dandy do when confronted with real moral problems, real emotions? We have seen the intellectual dandy priding himself on his achievement of detachment in formulae such as 'In matters of great importance,

⁵⁹⁴ See for example Broad, p. 103, Ransome, pp. 145 - 147, Ojala, I, 184, Merle, p. 341, Roditi, p. 141, O'Sullivan, p. 13.

style, not sincerity' and 'manners before morals!'; now we are to see him unable to avoid moral questions, and he must find the dandy's proper response if the dandy is to be more than a charming intellectual fancy. Earnest is an 'abdication', as Merle puts it, because in that play Wilde gave up trying to solve this problem: — instead of inventing the dandy who can cope with the world of trivia^l where dandy meets dandy, and dangerous passion, like the problem of evil, cannot penetrate its insulation of inconsequence. Thus he most fully realised his stylistic aim of perfection, but left aside his personal investigation.

The dandy is essentially a man with different ideas and standards than those of the society he lives in, yet a man who is a member of that society. The first three comedies present the dandy in contrast to his world, providing an opportunity for criticism of both parties. In Earnest the dandy becomes unreal, because the contrast with ordinary human society is replaced by a whole society informed with the spirit of dandyism.

I intend to leave Earnest to the end, and to discuss the other three comedies, which are more intimately inter-connected than any of them is with Earnest. The question of influence is no longer a vital one: treatment is the test. The influences are clear, and have been detailed by Hartley and Merle.⁵⁹⁵ Again they are French; the plots of the plays are borrowed from the theatre of Dumas fils, of Sardou and of Scribe: the plot of A Woman of No Importance has great similarities to Le Fils Naturel by Dumas fils,

⁵⁹⁵Merle, p. 336 ff., Hartley, p. 109 ff.

while, as Merle says, the plot of Earnest is a parody of both. The nature of Wilde's debt, even to Dumas fils, the most important influence, is largely mechanical, and confined to matters of plot, and need not concern us here. 596 But the main difference between Wilde's plays and those of his French models is in the hero, often heavily philosophic and moralistic in the French drama, the man who solves everyone's problems, 'le raisonneur'. Wilde's alteration changes the whole scope and nature of the situation; when 'le raisonneur' becomes the dandy, new, more sharply outlined moral questions are subtly interposed upon the old. The increase in subtlety is the most marked change: we now have an interplay of standards of judgement. The Victorian morality of respectability, the reliance on appearances, the ready condemnation of the non-conformist, all are criticised in the actions and the dénouements of the plays, by a more generous morality, a refusal to judge in generalities, a refusal to judge at all, a substitution of love for justice, and these attitudes are compared and contrasted with the dandy's. Sometimes the dandy causes us to regard the 'moral' ideas scathingly: sometimes his own attitude is found to be arid and unreal when he is faced with a real human situation.

Wilde's preoccupation with the relations of his aesthetic philosophy to life is openly admitted in De Profundis, where he declares that if he ever writes again he wishes to write of 'the Artistic life considered in its relation to Conduct'. 597

596 A full discussion of the question can be found in Merle, pp. 336 - 352.

597 Letters, p. 484.

It will no doubt seem strange to you that I should select it. People point to Reading Gaol, and say 'there is where the artistic life leads a man'. Well, it might lead one to worse places. The more mechanical people, to whom life is a shrewd speculation dependent on a careful calculation of ways and means, always know where they are going, and go there. They start with the desire of being the Parish Beadle, and, in whatever sphere they are placed, they succeed in being the Parish Beadle and no more . . . But with the dynamic forces of life, and those in whom those dynamic forces become incarnate, it is different. People whose desire is solely for self-realisation never know where they are going. They can't know. In one sense of the word it is, of course, necessary . . . to know oneself. That is the first achievement of knowledge. But to recognise that the soul of a man is unknowable is the ultimate achievement of Wisdom.⁵⁹⁸

In fact, the problem of finding a dynamic moral approach to life is the problem of De Profundis, as it is the problem of the first three comedies.

But it is undoubtedly the verbal brilliance of these plays that has given them their place in the English theatre. Wilde's more serious attempts to find a truth about life have indeed been too much ignored, but the wit of the dandy at his best, the wit of all the 'part-dandies', the wit that is merely the decorative hallmark of the society that Wilde created on the stage, these are the qualities that have lasted best. Wilde was no master of the language of true passion: the rhetorical phrases which moved the audiences of his time and were certainly no worse than those of Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, the other 'problem' dramatists of his time, read too often now as merely embarrassing, but as a

⁵⁹⁸ Letters, pp. 487 - 488.

comic playwright he was supreme, and so the humourous effects have always directed the attention away from the more serious things he was trying to say or explore.

The basis of Wilde's wit in the comedies is the use of antithesis; his comic method, as Howe pointed out,⁵⁹⁹ is the omission of the expected. We can see the method in Mrs. Allonby's account of her husband:

When Ernest and I were engaged, he swore to me positively on his knees that he had never loved any one before in the whole course of his life. I was very young at the time, so I didn't believe him, I needn't tell you. Unfortunately, however, I made no enquiries of any kind till after I had been actually married four or five months. I found out then that what he had told me was perfectly true. And that sort of thing makes a man so absolutely uninteresting.⁶⁰⁰

Another characteristic form of wit is inconsequence. There is Lady Markby who cannot stop talking, in a series of non sequiturs:

Well, like all stout women, she looks the very picture of happiness, as no doubt you noticed. But there are many tragedies in her family, besides this affair of the curate. Her own sister, Mrs. Jekyll, had a most unhappy life; through no fault of her own, I am sorry to say. She ultimately was so broken-hearted that she went into a convent, or on to the operatic stage, I forget which. No; I think it was decorative art - needlework she took up. I know she had lost all sense of pleasure in life.⁶⁰¹

The Duchess of Berwick has the same habit of running on, a sort of comic 'stream of consciousness' technique, where the selection of

⁵⁹⁹ P. 85.

⁶⁰⁰ W.N.I., p. 58.

⁶⁰¹ I.H., p. 122.

her remarks holds the key to the laughter, and the apparently arbitrary stream of thought shows her main preoccupations:

It was only Berwick's brutal and incessant threats of suicide that made me accept him at all, and before the year was out he was running after all kinds of petticoats, every colour, every shape, every material. In fact, before the honeymoon was over, I caught him winking at my maid, a most pretty, respectable girl. I dismissed her at once without a character. - No, I remember I passed her on to my sister; poor dear Sir George is so short-sighted, I thought it wouldn't matter. But it did, though - it was most unfortunate.⁶⁰²

The characters in the plays, although the best have a subtle individuality created by their way of speaking, are classifiable into general types. There are the serious characters, deeply involved in the moral problem which is to implicate the dandy; in particular there is the 'good woman', truly well-intentioned but ignorant of life - Lady Windermere, Hester Worsley, Lady Chiltern all have to be taught to modify their rhetorical moral generalities, their inhuman ideals of perfection in others. The serious men, such as Lord Windermere, Gerald Arbuthnot and Sir Robert Chiltern, are rather colourless. There are the rather wicked, experienced, witty women, Mrs. Erlynne, Mrs. Allonby, Mrs. Cheveley, whose actual part in the plot can be good or wicked or even unimportant, but who are recognisable as sisters by their idiom. There are the dowagers, the Duchess of Berwick, Lady Hunstanton, Lady Caroline Pontefract, Lady Markby, all leading to the epitome of the dowager, realised in Lady Bracknell. There is a host of minor characters, male and female, either sharply particularised by their language

⁶⁰²L.W.F., p. 29.

and richly comic like Dr. Daubeney, Mr. Kelvil and Lord Caversham, or partaking of the semi-dandy character and wit of the glamorous, clever society Wilde created.

Most important, there are the dandies. Dr. Ian Gregor has already shown how they are established and how they retain their wit and detachment until forced to take part in the drama, when they become for the time at least, straight characters again.⁶⁰³ But there is another interesting point about them: clearly Wilde admired the dandies, clearly he identified himself with them a great deal. But their failure to retain their identity and attitude to life in face of moral considerations is one of Wilde's own criticisms of the dandies, and another emerges, probably unintentionally: Wilde's young dandies, such as Lord Darlington and especially Lord Goring are charming and admirable, but the dandy does not age well: he becomes corrupt. In Wilde's work as a whole there are Prince Paul Maraloffski in Vera, the middle-aged cynic who is Duke of Padua, Lord Illingworth, the villain of A Woman of No Importance, and Lord Henry Wotton, the corrupting influence over Dorian Gray. These last two in particular have a great deal in common. It seems that dandyism is only charming in youth; it requires a pose of experience, not experience itself. Wilde always put a particular value on youth, and it is the middle-aged dandies in his works who value it most. We have considered Lord Henry's eulogies of youth; Lord Illingworth echoes him in

⁶⁰³ In a forthcoming article in Sewanee Review, 'Comedy in Oscar Wilde'.

ideas, even in phrases:

Remember that you've got on your side the most wonderful thing in the world - youth! There is nothing like youth. The middle-aged are mortgaged to Life. The old are in life's lumber-room. But youth is the Lord of Life. Youth has a kingdom waiting for it. Every one is born a king, and most people die in exile, like most kings. To win back my youth, Gerald, there is nothing I wouldn't do - except take exercise, get up early, or be a useful member of the community.⁶⁰⁴

The original title of Lady Windermere's Fan was A Good Woman.⁶⁰⁵

This emphasis is important, for Wilde's ironical treatment of the 'good woman' follows the same kind of pattern as his treatment of the dandy. Each has a kind of escape route from what Wilde called 'that dreadful universal thing called human nature'.⁶⁰⁶ The dandy's is a conscious, studied attempt at detachment, which tends to break down under strain: the 'good woman's' is an unconscious escape to ideals of perfection, and a refusal to recognise human weakness; this Wilde treats sternly always, and in this play much more attention is paid to the problem of the good woman than to that of the dandy.

Much has been made of the alteration of the play at the end of Act I, to let the audience into the secret that Mrs. Erlynne is Lady Windermere's mother. Certainly Wilde thought it important enough to disagree strongly with Alexander when it was suggested in rehearsal. He considered that it ruined the 'element of suspense and curiosity, a quality so essentially dramatic'.⁶⁰⁷ He put great

⁶⁰⁴ W.N.I., p. 106. Cf. Dorian Gray, pp. 35, 245.

⁶⁰⁵ Letters, p. 296.

⁶⁰⁶ Intentions, p. 15.

⁶⁰⁷ Letters, p. 308.

stress on his conception of Mrs. Erlynne as a woman 'who has had a child, but never known the passion of maternity',⁶⁰⁸ but is touched by it once and so appalled by the strength of her feeling that she shuns it for the future. But this character, in so far as Wilde succeeds in his portrayal, is not spoiled by the revelation, nor is Wilde's criticism of moral attitudes throughout the play. Perhaps he realised this when he conceded to the demands of his friends after the first night, to change the point; at any rate the play is quite strong enough not to have to depend on a long-drawn-out puzzle, for the moral criticisms are present in detail in dialogue and the attitudes of the characters, and are largely unaffected by the timing of the disclosure.

The play begins with the establishment of the characters of Lady Windermere and Lord Darlington. He pays her extravagant compliments, because he feels more seriously about her than he cares to admit: she sternly rebukes him because she is too serious to accept compliments, and cannot help taking them seriously:-

Lord Darlington: Ah, nowadays we are all of us so hard up, that the only pleasant things to pay are compliments. They're the only things we can pay.

Lady Windermere: No, I am talking very seriously. You mustn't laugh, I am quite serious. I don't like compliments, and I don't see why a man should think he is pleasing a woman enormously when he says to her a whole heap of things that he doesn't mean. ⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁸Letters, p. 331.

⁶⁰⁹L.W.F., p. 5.

Lady Windermere cannot understand the position of the dandy:

'Believe me, you are better than most other men, and I sometimes think you pretend to be worse.'⁶¹⁰ The pride of the dandy is to be misunderstood, for the world only takes dull people seriously. She cannot comprehend his level of conversation, and he is obliged to return to hers. He has already heard gossip about Lord Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne, and knows it will hurt her; her self-revelation shows the audience how much it will hurt her:

You think I am a Puritan, I suppose? Well, I have something of the Puritan in me. I was brought up like that. I am glad of it . . . she taught me what the world is forgetting, the difference that there is between what is right and what is wrong. She allowed of no compromise. I allow of none.⁶¹¹

Lord Darlington wishes to 'console' her because of Windermere's defection, and sounds her on the subject: she trots out the stock, meaningless moral reaction: 'Because the husband is vile - should the wife be vile also?'⁶¹² She does not believe in forgiveness for people who have once sinned - and of course the whole idea of sin for the good woman seems to rest on sexual misconduct. Darlington protests: 'I think life too complex a thing to be settled by these hard and fast rules.'⁶¹³

Here the matter rests with the entry of the Duchess of Berwick with Lady Agatha. Lady Agatha has been admired as one of Wilde's best comic creations; this would have tickled Wilde immensely, as

⁶¹⁰L.W.F., p. 6.

⁶¹¹Ibid. pp. 8 - 9.

⁶¹²Ibid. p. 12.

⁶¹³Ibid. p. 14.

he adapted her, enriching the comedy, straight from Les Oies Blanches by Dumas fils, where Juliette de Lussieu always answers 'Oui, Madame'.⁶¹⁴ The Duchess represents the smart, witty society which idolises the dandy. The Duchess tells Lady Windermere what Society says about Lord Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne. She does not immediately believe it, but has to investigate, and when she finds Windermere's secret bank book with its record of payments to Mrs. Erlynne, her mind switches to complete credulity: 'Oh! it is true! It is true! How horrible!'⁶¹⁵

This is the first of a series of judgements made on appearances which Wilde indirectly castigates in the course of the play. In fact, it could be said to be a play about prejudice and summary judgement, with the conclusion that one should never have prejudices, and if we judge it must be with full knowledge of the facts - that judgement on appearances, one of Society's basic habits, is wrong. So far at least Wilde inculcates the philosophy of the dandy. Lady Windermere's decision to believe this rumour on the 'evidence' wipes out two years of love and trust, or it makes them unreal, a play she had believed in. As she passionately loved and trusted Lord Windermere, now she despises and rejects him. She will not listen to the case in Mrs. Erlynne's favour, and has no pity, she is only self-righteous: 'I am not interested in her - and - you should not mentioned this woman and me in the same breath. It is an error of taste.'⁶¹⁶ She refuses to believe Lord Windermere, refuses to

⁶¹⁴ Merle, p. 341.

⁶¹⁵ L.W.F., p. 33.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid. p. 38.

invite Mrs. Erlynne to her house: 'How hard good women are!'⁶¹⁷
 She threatens to insult Mrs. Erlynne if Lord Windermere invites her. Her conduct makes her past love a mockery:-

Lord Windermere: Margaret, you'll ruin us!

Lady Windermere: Us! From this moment my life is
 separate from yours. ⁶¹⁸

Her principles provide that her actions have no relation to life whatever. She is a stock character, and unconvincing in so far as Wilde uses her to criticise the beliefs of all whom she represents. With this threat of insult and the hint of a secret about Mrs. Erlynne, the curtain falls, to rise again on the scene of the ball.

At the ball, Society chatters gaily, unaware of the drama building up between the principal characters. Lord Augustus, Mrs. Erlynne's elderly swain, questions Windermere anxiously about her; even for him, love is not enough, she must be 'respectable'.⁶¹⁹ Tension increases; Lady Windermere repeats her threat, and Lord Windermere can only reply despairingly and with some truth:- 'Ah, Margaret, only trust me! A wife should trust her husband!' ⁶²⁰ But on Mrs. Erlynne's entry Lady Windermere loses her nerve and bows coldly. The importance of Mrs. Erlynne's reception in this house is emphasised: it puts a seal on her respectability; she can now be accepted by Society.⁶²¹ Lady Windermere's distress gives Lord Darlington a chance to declare his love, but she wants

⁶¹⁷ L.W.F., p. 42.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 46 - 47.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 58 - 59.

⁶²⁰ Ibid. p. 64.

⁶²¹ E.g. the Duchess, p. 82.

friendship, not love. Lord Darlington describes her situation to her as he sees it, from a view of personal, not conventional morality; she would be degraded by staying with a husband who is false:

I won't tell you that the world matters nothing, or the world's voice, or the voice of society. They matter a great deal. They matter far too much. But there are moments when one has to choose between living one's own life, fully, entirely, completely - or dragging out some false, shallow, degrading existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands. ⁶²²

It is wrong for her to stay with Windermere - she must live up to her previous claim and make no compromise. He sees her hesitation and declares passionately:

You are not what I thought you were. You are just the same as every other woman. You would stand anything rather than face the censure of a world, whose praise you would despise. ⁶²³

He has entirely lost the accents of the dandy, as Dr. Gregor has pointed out. The essence of dandyism is detachment, and he cannot preserve even a semblance of it: the dandy will fare better in An Ideal Husband, where the good woman can flee for comfort to the dandy, who remains only a friend and preserves his detachment because his heart is elsewhere. He leaves her finally because she cannot decide at once to go away with him. Now he is a man in love, no more. The frivolity of Society continues, undisturbed by all the storms of passion. Seeing Lord Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne

⁶²²L.W.F., p. 78.

⁶²³Ibid. p. 80.

together, Lady Windermere resolves to go to Lord Darlington after all, reinforcing her decision with emotive logic: 'It is he who has broken the bond of marriage - not I. I only break its bondage.'⁶²⁴

Mrs. Erlynne's discovery of Lady Windermere's departure and the letter she has left underlines the basic flaw in Wilde's problem comedies - he cannot command the language of deep and complex passion, at least in modern dress: he always envisaged tragedy 'with a purple pall'.

Gone out of her house! A letter addressed to
her husband! No, no! It would be impossible!
Life doesn't repeat its tragedies like that!
Oh, why does this horrible fancy come across me? etc.⁶²⁵

Only the drama of the situation makes the language at all adequate. She quickly recovers, and decides to right matters if possible.

Act III opens with Lady Windermere soliloquising. Again, it is false and forced, especially at the end, when she wonders if Lord Darlington will allow her to return home: 'Will he let me go away at all? I have heard that men are brutal, horrible . . . Oh!'⁶²⁶ But it is Mrs. Erlynne who enters, and tries to persuade her to return home. Lady Windermere pours out denunciations, and platitudes about 'fallen women', but at last Mrs. Erlynne persuades her, with a double-edged weapon. First she speaks of Lord Windermere's love, but Lady Windermere replies in a cliché taught

⁶²⁴L.W.F., p. 93.

⁶²⁵Ibid. p. 95.

⁶²⁶Ibid. p. 105.

her by Society: 'You talk as if you had a heart. Women like you have no hearts. Heart is not in you. You are bought and sold.'⁶²⁷ Then Mrs. Erlynne speaks of the judgement of Society, with the bitterness of experience, and finally, with an irony that we can share if we know her secret, she implores Lady Windermere to return, if only for her child. Her success seems useless, for they are surprised, and have to hide. The men have returned to Lord Darlington's rooms, and begin to chat. Lord Darlington is now a dandy no more; he takes little part in the conversation, and when he does speak it is as a man hopelessly in love. The conversation is witty and general, centring of course on women, and then Cecil Graham finds the fan. To save her daughter, Mrs. Erlynne soils her doubtful reputation still further by appearing and claiming the fan, while Lady Windermere slips away unobserved.

At the beginning of Act IV Lady Windermere has learnt that appearances can be misleading, for now they are against her, and she dare not confess:- 'How securely one thinks one lives - out of reach of temptation, sin, folly.'⁶²⁸ She cannot believe Mrs. Erlynne will continue to sacrifice her good name, but she is learning:

There is a bitter irony in things, a bitter irony
in the way we talk of good and bad women . . .
Oh, what a lesson! and what a pity that in life
we only get our lessons when they are of no use

⁶²⁷L.W.F., p. 114.

⁶²⁸Ibid. p. 145.

to us! For even if she doesn't tell, I must.⁶²⁹

Lord Windermere has now fallen victim to the same type of snap judgement as his wife had done before; seeing Mrs. Erlynne at Darlington's rooms is enough: 'I believed what she told me - I was mistaken in her. She is bad - as bad as a woman can be.'⁶³⁰ Now it is for his wife to teach him, and the lesson she has learned is the more valuable in that she has not learned that Mrs. Erlynne is quite guiltless, she simply now knows her to be capable of good.

What are called good women may have terrible things in them, mad moods of recklessness, assertion, jealousy, sin. Bad women, as they are termed, may have in them sorrow, repentance, pity, sacrifice. And I don't think Mrs. Erlynne a bad woman - I know she's not.⁶³¹

She has begun to learn the shortcomings of iron rules of behaviour.

When Mrs. Erlynne calls to return the fan, Lord Windermere tells her it is monstrous that she should come, having shown her true character. She, very properly here, preaches the lesson of the dandy: 'My dear Windermere, manners before morals!'⁶³²

Windermere attacks her at length, and all his charges are true - what is more, he has known it all along - she did desert her husband and child, but Wilde has educated his audience in the course of the play; they know the truth of Windermere's charges, but they react against his judgement, because of one fact they know and he does not, Mrs. Erlynne's self-sacrifice of the night before. Again the

⁶²⁹L.W.F., pp. 147 - 148.

⁶³⁰Ibid. p. 151.

⁶³¹Ibid. p. 151.

⁶³²Ibid. p. 157.

lesson is to avoid judging others because you cannot have perfect knowledge. Mrs. Erlynne reveals that she cannot face the pain of motherhood now that she knows it fully; it has spoiled her dandy's surface and made her feel. Lady Windermere gives Mrs. Erlynne her photograph, and Wilde's point is reinforced, both the lesson of the play and the limited extent to which Lady Windermere has learned it:-

Lady Windermere: We all have ideals in life.
At least we all should have.
Mine is my mother.

Mrs. Erlynne: Ideals are dangerous things.
Realities are better. They
wound, but they're better.

Lady Windermere: If I lost my ideals, I should
lose everything.

Mrs. Erlynne: Everything?

Lady Windermere: Yes.⁶³³

The happy ending is supplied by Mrs. Erlynne's explanation to Lord Augustus, and their proposed marriage. Lord Windermere's verdict that Mrs. Erlynne is a very clever woman, and Lady Windermere's that she is a very good woman are both to some extent beside the point, but they leave the audience feeling in possession of superior knowledge, and Wilde has seen to it that this 'superior knowledge' involves a good deal of implicit criticism of conventional morality.

A Woman of No Importance shows us the dandy as villain, but one of its most important critical points is thoroughly typical of the dandy, that to be good, even irreproachably good, like Hester

⁶³³L.W.F., p. 172.

Worsley, is not enough. As Mrs. Erlynne said, 'Manners before morals!' Again we must not make judgements. The good women of this play are particularly unattractive, because they are not helped by but opposed to the dandy. A Woman of No Importance is perhaps Wilde's least successful play, because here he fails most signally to enlist the audience's sympathy for any characters: the good are not only good but abominably priggish, even when they learn the moral lesson that love and not justice is God's law, and the dandy is charming but corrupt, and Lord Illingworth's decadence and evil taint all the witticisms: it seems one cannot be a dandy without being wicked.

The first good woman we meet is Hester Worsley, the outspoken young American attending Lady Hunstanton's house party. She must learn, whether her judgements are right or wrong, not to air them so emphatically and self-righteously. The guests discuss each other:

Lady Caroline: But Mrs. Allonby is hardly a very suitable person.

Hester: I dislike Mrs. Allonby. I dislike her more than I can say.

Lady Caroline: I am not sure, Miss Worsley, that foreigners like yourself should cultivate likes or dislikes about people they are invited to meet.⁶³⁴

Here Society, represented by Lady Caroline, is perfectly right. They discuss Gerald Arbuthnot, and again Hester is outspoken:

⁶³⁴W.N.I., p. 3.

Hester: Mr. Arbuthnot has a beautiful nature! He is so simple, so sincere. He has one of the most beautiful natures I have ever come across. It is a privilege to meet him.

Lady Caroline: It is not customary in England, Miss Worsley, for a young lady to speak with such enthusiasm of any person of the opposite sex.⁶³⁵

Again, Society will not have this plain speech. It is not so bad as her adverse comments, but could be very embarrassing, and is an affront to decency.

The first Act of A Woman of No Importance, said Wilde, was written in answer to criticisms of lack of action in Lady Windermere's Fan. This is a perfect act, and contains no action whatever.⁶³⁶ Most of it is taken up with clever trivia, defining character and creating atmosphere. Lady Hunstanton varies her social behaviour with skill: when neither Lord Illingworth nor Mrs. Allonby is present, she tends to talk like a dandy; when they are present, she relapses into a dowager, always with perfect self-possession. Lady Caroline has the same fluctuating tone. Mr. Kelvil is a serious Pillar of Society, bringing with him everywhere a High Moral Tone. Lord Illingworth is at first the complete dandy, voicing the aesthetic creed:

Lord Illingworth: One should never take sides in anything, Mr. Kelvil. Taking sides is the beginning of sincerity, and earnestness follows shortly afterwards, and the human being becomes a bore. However, the House of Commons really does very little harm. You can't make people good by Act of Parliament - that is something.

⁶³⁵W.N.I., p. 4.

⁶³⁶Pearson, p. 236.

Kelvil: You cannot deny that the House of Commons has always shown great sympathy with the sufferings of the poor.

Lord Illingworth: That is its special vice. That is the special vice of the age. One should sympathise with the joy, the beauty, the colour of life.⁶³⁷

Kelvil's opinion of Lord Illingworth seems like a gentle parody of Society's opinion of Wilde himself - not the brilliant Society he created, but the drabber one of reality:

Lord Illingworth is, of course, a very brilliant man, but he seems to me to be lacking in that fine faith in the nobility and purity of life which is so important in this century . . . I would say he was tainted with foreign ideas on the subject.⁶³⁸

Mrs. Allonby is the perfect sparring partner for Lord Illingworth's wit. Their brilliant short scene together before the entrance of Gerald and Hester underlines Hester's social inadequacy:-

Mrs. Allonby: Don't you find yourself longing for a London dinner-party?

Hester: I dislike London dinner-parties.⁶³⁹

Free speech such as Hester's is not a help in social intercourse - we begin to see the necessity for trivia in conversation. The first Act ends with Mrs. Allonby's light challenge to Lord Illingworth on kissing the Puritan, and all that has been established is this challenge, Gerald's offer of employment from Lord Illingworth, and a hint that Lord Illingworth knows Mrs. Arbuthnot.

⁶³⁷W.N.I., pp. 21 - 22.

⁶³⁸Ibid. pp. 27 - 28.

⁶³⁹Ibid. p. 36.

The second Act opens with the women in after-dinner conversation, the only topic of which is, of course, men. Mrs. Allonby airs her delightfully daring ideas for the edification of Lady Stutfield. We see how the niceties of conversation can conceal barbs and express considerable acidity:

- Mrs. Allonby: Ah, my husband is a sort of promissory note; I'm tired of meeting him.
- Lady Caroline: But you renew him from time to time, don't you?
- Mrs. Allonby: Oh no, Lady Caroline. I have only had one husband as yet. I suppose you look upon me as quite an amateur.⁶⁴⁰

Often the wit arises from the reversal of the expected meaning:

- Mrs. Allonby: Well, I will tell you, if you solemnly promise to tell everybody else.
- Lady Stutfield: Thank you, thank you. I will make a point of repeating it.⁶⁴¹

When Mrs. Allonby is asked to define the Ideal Husband, we see another flaw in dandyism as a system: 'The Ideal Husband? There couldn't be such a thing. The institution is wrong.'⁶⁴² She has put her finger on a crux here; marriage is difficult to square with dandyism, but children seem an insuperable difficulty: they prevent detachment and demand the acceptance of responsibility and permanence. We never see a dandy as a family man, despite Lord Illingworth's belated efforts in this play.

Hester Worsley is appalled at the conversation, and says so,

⁶⁴⁰W.N.I., p. 53.

⁶⁴¹Ibid. p. 57.

⁶⁴²Ibid. p. 61.

despite Lady Hunstanton's efforts to restore social decency to the conversation:

Hester: I couldn't believe that any women could really hold such views of life as I have heard tonight from some of your guests.

Lady Hunstanton: I hear you have such pleasant society in America. Quite like our own in places, my son wrote to me.⁶⁴³

Hester begins her very self-righteous diatribe on the natural virtues of American society as opposed to the decadent artificiality of English society. She fully deserves Lady Stutfield's comment, 'She is painfully natural, isn't she?'⁶⁴⁴ Her denunciation of Lord Henry Weston leads her to denounce also the women he has ruined: 'Let all women who have sinned be punished.'⁶⁴⁵ Mrs. Arbuthnot enters in time to hear this. She goes on to make more and more harsh rules for the punishment of sinners, showing a lack of any warmth or understanding. One of Wilde's finest dramatic effects for sheer simplicity comes at the end of this speech:

Hester: . . . And till you count what is a shame in a woman to be infamy in a man, you will always be unjust, and Right, that pillar of fire, and Wrong, that pillar of cloud, will be made dim to your eyes, or be not seen at all, or if seen, not regarded.

Lady Caroline: Might I, dear Miss Worsley, as you are standing up, ask you for my cotton that is just behind you? Thank you.⁶⁴⁶

The conversation moves on to let Mrs. Arbuthnot gradually realise the truth about Lord Illingworth's identity. She attempts to leave, but Gerald insists on introducing her to Lord Illingworth.

⁶⁴³W.N.I., p. 67.

⁶⁴⁴Ibid. p. 68.

⁶⁴⁵Ibid. p. 72.

⁶⁴⁶Ibid. pp. 72 - 73.

They are left alone together, and neither shows up attractively. Mrs. Arbuthnot pleads that Gerald should not be taken from her, in the unreal rhetoric that is Wilde's substitute for passion. Lord Illingworth has a splendid way of seeming reasonable in his selfishness. Just as in Earnest Algernon can eat the cucumber sandwiches prepared for Lady Bracknell because she is his aunt, so Illingworth protests: 'My dear Rachel, you have had him to yourself for over twenty years. Why not let me have him for a little now? He is quite as much mine as yours.',⁶⁴⁷ and manages to sound convincing. He accuses her of selfishness and illogicality, of ruining Gerald's career. Nothing will move him, and as Mrs. Arbuthnot dare not tell Gerald the truth, she has to acquiesce.

The third Act shows Lord Illingworth's attempt to metamorphose Gerald into a dandy: he takes on the accents, and sometimes the very words, of Lord Henry Wotton in his awakening of Dorian. He meets with some success. He lauds youth and modernity as Lord Henry did. He insists: 'You want to be modern, don't you, Gerald? You want to know life as it really is. Not to be put off with any old-fashioned theories about life.' Again, he is a weary echo of Lord Henry. He teaches Gerald the dandy's view of Society:

Gerald: I suppose society is wonderfully delightful!

Lord Illingworth: To be in it is merely a bore. But to be out of it simply a tragedy. Society is a necessary thing.⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴⁷W.N.I., p. 92.

⁶⁴⁸Ibid. p. 109.

Mrs. Arbuthnot reveals that she has grown hard: 'I think there are many things women should never forgive . . . The ruin of another woman's life.'⁶⁴⁹ Hester has a private talk with her, and shows that Society has already taught her something: 'I had been foolish. There are things that are right to say, but that may be said at the wrong time and to the wrong people.'⁶⁵⁰ Mrs. Arbuthnot agrees with Hester's stern rules about life - a man and woman who have sinned should both be punished, as should their children: 'It is a just law. It is God's law'.⁶⁵¹ Hester persuades Mrs. Arbuthnot to ask Gerald not to go with Lord Illingworth. He has already imbibed a great deal of the new teaching:

You have told me that the world is a wicked place, that success is not worth having, that society is shallow, and all that sort of thing - well, I don't believe it, mother. I think the world must be delightful. I think society must be exquisite. I think success is a thing worth having. You have been wrong in all that you taught me, mother, quite wrong. Lord Illingworth is a successful man. He is a fashionable man. He is a man who lives in the world and for it. Well, I would give anything to be just like Lord Illingworth.⁶⁵²

To prevent him, she forces herself to tell the story of her seduction by Illingworth, as if it happened to someone else. Lord Illingworth had foretold his response: 'You have educated him to be your judge if he ever finds you out. And a bitter, an unjust judge he will be to you.'⁶⁵³ Gerald is unmoved:

⁶⁴⁹W.N.I., p. 160.

⁶⁵⁰Ibid. p. 163.

⁶⁵¹Ibid. p. 169.

⁶⁵²Ibid. pp. 173 - 174.

⁶⁵³Ibid. p. 97.

My dear mother, it all sounds very tragic, of course. But I dare say the girl was just as much to blame as Lord Illingworth was.- After all, would a really nice girl, a girl with any nice feelings at all, go away from her home with a man to whom she was not married, and live with him as his wife? No nice girl would.⁶⁵⁴

Mrs. Arbuthnot is crushed, and agrees again to let him go. But now, ironically, what that bitter tale of seduction and desertion in general would not do, a lightly stolen kiss from a Puritan can. When Hester is 'insulted' by Lord Illingworth, Gerald swears to kill him, so that Mrs. Arbuthnot can bring down the curtain on the supremely effective line: 'Stop, Gerald, stop! He is your own father!'⁶⁵⁵

The fourth Act has still a surprise for us - and for Mrs. Arbuthnot. Gerald decides that she must marry Lord Illingworth. He is going by 'the rules'. And Mrs. Arbuthnot firmly rejects them: 'I will not marry Lord Illingworth.'⁶⁵⁶ Gerald is sure of himself: 'I can't understand why you won't look at this matter from the right, from the only proper standpoint.'⁶⁵⁷ But Mrs. Arbuthnot is hard. This touches her so deeply that conventions don't count. She realises that marriage now to Lord Illingworth would be a mockery. Gerald attempts to sway her by religious arguments, and she becomes more adamant.

At last she pours out her feelings, her love for Gerald, in a long, and, nowadays at least, hideously embarrassing speech, the

⁶⁵⁴W.N.I., p. 143.

⁶⁵⁵Ibid. p. 145.

⁶⁵⁶Ibid. p. 160.

⁶⁵⁷Ibid. p. 163.

gist of which is that she has never been able to repent her sin because she loves Gerald so much, and he is the result of her sin. Her despairing cry: 'Child of my shame, be still the child of my shame!','⁶⁵⁸ has long been a theatrical joke, but her basic point is sound. Gerald still can't see it - but once more Hester comes to the rescue. When Mrs. Arbuthnot cannot convince Gerald by passionate speeches, it takes Hester no time at all. She agrees with Mrs. Arbuthnot: both have discarded their iron rules of conduct. There is an embarrassing reconciliation, but Mrs. Arbuthnot shows some spirit in repeating Hester's earlier words, and Hester shows courage in admitting she was wrong:

Mrs. Arbuthnot: . . . The sins of the parents should be visited on the children. It is God's law.

Hester: I was wrong. God's law is only Love.⁶⁵⁹

All is now settled, but we have not seen the last of Lord Illingworth. He arrives, still self-righteous: 'What is of importance to-day, as yesterday, is still our son.'⁶⁶⁰ He makes proposals to share Gerald with Mrs. Arbuthnot, but she shows no interest. He finds Gerald's letter and opens it, and for once he is no dandy:

But to get my son back I am ready - yes, I am ready to marry you, Rachel - and to treat you always with the deference and respect due to my wife. I will marry you as soon as you choose. I give you my word of honour.⁶⁶¹

⁶⁵⁸W.N.I., p. 169.

⁶⁵⁹Ibid. pp. 173 - 174.

⁶⁶⁰Ibid. p. 177.

⁶⁶¹Ibid. p. 183.

Her refusal gives him a chance to recover his poise: 'Do tell me your reasons. They would interest me enormously.'⁶⁶² Again Mrs. Arbuthnot, enjoying getting some revenge, quotes his earlier words to his face: 'Children begin by loving their parents. After a time they judge them. Rarely if ever do they forgive them.'⁶⁶³ Lord Illingworth considers that Gerald's letter is the conventional response to the situation, he does not know what 'fin-de-siècle' person could have dissuaded him. He recovers his nerve and leaves with studied rudeness, so that Mrs. Arbuthnot strikes him and is left crying. But she is able to achieve her final victory with a new version of the curtain line from Act I: 'Oh! no one. No one in particular. A man of no importance.'⁶⁶⁴

An Ideal Husband is Wilde's longest play, and the most successful of the 'problem' comedies. First, it is not based on secret sins of passion, the confession of which by his characters brings out all the worst in Wilde's writing: the secret on which the plot hinges is a dishonest business deal with which a successful politician is to be blackmailed. This is easier for Wilde to make convincing, and enlarges the scope of the play. Secondly, here the dandy comes nearest to success in the dull moral world of every day. Lord Goring is not in love with the good woman, as Lord Darlington was in *Lady Windermere's Fan*; he has not 'wronged' her as Lord Illingworth had in A Woman of No Importance. He has had a love relationship with

⁶⁶²W.N.I., p. 184.

⁶⁶³Ibid. p. 187.

⁶⁶⁴Ibid. p. 191.

Mrs. Cheveley, but long enough ago to be philosophic and detached about it. He is in love now, with Mabel Chiltern, but this does not directly involve him in any of the passion and drama of the play: she is his ideal mate, and they show and disguise their feelings in delightful, trivial flirtation. Society also scintillates with a delicate brilliance, as we meet the guests at Lady Chiltern's ball. But most of all, Lord Goring is young, and in particular, young at heart, and the young dandy is a most attractive character. Mabel Chiltern describes him:

Why, he rides in the Row at ten o'clock in the morning, goes to the Opera three times a week, changes his clothes at least five times a day, and dines out every night of the season. You don't call that an idle life, do you?⁶⁶⁵

Wilde also describes him on his entrance:

Thirty-four, but always says he is younger. A well-bred, expressionless face. He is clever, but would not like to be thought so. A flawless dandy, he would be annoyed if he were considered romantic. He plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world. He is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of vantage.⁶⁶⁶

Mrs. Cheveley is introduced to Lady Chiltern, who with the merciless memory of the good woman instantly remembers her school peccadilloes. Sir Robert, the politician and diplomat, can meet Mrs. Cheveley on her own terms, and pay her compliments. She confesses: 'I wanted immensely to meet you, and . . . to ask you

⁶⁶⁵I.H., p. 5.

⁶⁶⁶Ibid. pp. 20 - 21.

to do something for me.'':⁶⁶⁷ his answer is worthy of the dandy:
 'I hope it is not a little thing, Mrs. Cheveley. I find that
 little things are so very difficult to do.' All this time he has
 been unsuspecting, but her mention of Baron Arnheim puts him on his
 guard. Lord Goring interrupts their conversation, and they drift
 away. Lord Goring is suspicious of Mrs. Cheveley, but secretive
 also:

Lord Goring: . . . Who brought Mrs. Cheveley here?
 That woman in heliotrope, who has just
 gone out of the room with your brother?

Mabel Chiltern: Oh, I think Lady Markby brought her.
 Why do you ask?

Lord Goring: I haven't seen her for years, that is
 all.⁶⁶⁸

The next few minutes establish Lord Goring's character: when his
 father accuses him of dancing until four in the morning, he responds
 politely in self-justification: 'Only a quarter to four, father.'⁶⁶⁹
 He airs the same sort of opinions as Lord Illingworth, but gives the
 comfortable feeling that he doesn't really mean what he says:

Lord Caversham: You seem to me to be living entirely
 for pleasure.

Lord Goring: What else is there to live for,
 father? Nothing ages like happiness.⁶⁷⁰

His wit is as sharp and quick:

Lord Goring: Handsome woman, Mrs. Cheveley!

Lady Basildon: Please don't praise other women in
 our presence. You might wait for
 us to do that!

Lord Goring: I did wait.⁶⁷¹

⁶⁶⁷I.H., p. 18.

⁶⁶⁸Ibid. p. 24.

⁶⁶⁹Ibid. p. 27.

⁶⁷⁰Ibid. p. 27.

⁶⁷¹Ibid. p. 31.

At last we return to Mrs. Cheveley and Sir Robert. First she asks him to support her fraudulent scheme, then offers to bribe him: at last, she openly blackmails him. This is the same method that Dorian Gray employed to get Alan Campbell's assistance after his murder of Basil Hallward. Mrs. Cheveley points out the tyranny of society, and the weakness of Sir Robert's position:

In old days nobody pretended to be a bit better than his neighbours. In fact, to be a bit better than one's neighbour was considered excessively vulgar and middle-class. Nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, every one has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility, and all the other seven deadly virtues - and what is the result? You all go over like ninepins - one after the other.⁶⁷²

The price she asks for the suppression of his early crime is support in her latest fraudulent speculation. The picture she draws of his downfall persuades him, and he agrees. Almost immediately, Lady Markby reminds the audience of Lady Chiltern's moral integrity:

Lady Chiltern is a woman of the very highest principles, I am glad to say . . . And Lady Chiltern has a very ennobling effect on life, though her dinner-parties are rather dull sometimes.⁶⁷³

Mrs. Cheveley cannot resist flaunting her victory before Lady Chiltern as she leaves. Meanwhile, and very importantly for the plot, Mabel Chiltern finds a diamond brooch and Lord Goring takes charge of it, admitting that he recognises it.

Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern are left alone, and immediately she begins the attack. Like her predecessors in the role of 'good

⁶⁷²I.H., p. 46.

⁶⁷³Ibid. p. 51.

woman' she is hard and unforgiving:

I hated, I despised her. She stole things, she was a thief. She was sent away for being a thief. Why do you let her influence you?⁶⁷⁴

What is more, she makes her judgement so general that Sir Robert applies it to himself: 'One's past is what one is. It is the only way by which people should be judged.'⁶⁷⁵ With fine moral arguments she attacks his compromise, and shows her weakness, her distance from reality:

You are different. All your life you have stood apart from others. You have never let the world soil you. To the world, as to myself, you have been an ideal always. Oh! be that ideal still. That great inheritance throw not away - that tower of ivory do not destroy. Robert, men can love what is beneath them - things unworthy, stained, dishonoured. We women worship when we love; and when we lose our worship, we lose everything. Oh! don't kill my love for you, don't kill that!⁶⁷⁶

If he has sinned, they must drift apart. He cannot confess in face of this attitude, and so is deprived of her help when he most needs it. She insists he must write to Mrs. Cheveley reversing his decision, yet even in her triumph she holds out no hope for him:

Sir Robert Chiltern: Oh, love me always, Gertrude, love me always!

Lady Chiltern: I will love you always, because you will always be worthy of love.⁶⁷⁷

In the second Act Sir Robert takes his problem to the more sympathetic ears of Lord Goring, who is kind, but forces him to

⁶⁷⁴I.H., p. 60.

⁶⁷⁵Ibid. p. 61.

⁶⁷⁶Ibid. p. 65.

⁶⁷⁷Ibid. p. 69.

face his guilt:

Sir Robert Chiltern: And, after all, whom did I
wrong by what I did? No one.

Lord Goring: Except yourself, Robert.⁶⁷⁸

He confesses the whole affair, describing Baron Arnheim as another Lord Henry Wotton, himself as another Dorian Gray. Baron Arnheim's creed was power, and Lord Goring does not hesitate to judge it; 'a thoroughly shallow creed.'⁶⁷⁹ Sir Robert has still refused to accept full responsibility and recognise his guilt, although he does so by the end of the play. Lord Goring advises him to tell his wife, but she has made this impossible. Lord Goring urges him to fight:

Sir Robert Chiltern: I will fight her to the death,
as long as my wife knows nothing.

Lord Goring: Oh, fight in any case - in any
case.⁶⁸⁰

Left alone with Lady Chiltern, Lord Goring attempts to prepare her for compromise with her high principles. He is still the dandy:

Lord Goring: But, my dear Lady Chiltern, I think, if
you will allow me to say so, that in
practical life -

Lady Chiltern: Of which you know so little, Lord Goring -

Lord Goring: Of which I know nothing by experience,
though I know something by observation.⁶⁸¹

He suggests that she is too hard:

I think that . . . often you don't make sufficient
allowances. In every nature there are elements
of weakness, or worse than weakness.⁶⁸²

⁶⁷⁸I.H., p. 76.

⁶⁷⁹Ibid. p. 81.

⁶⁸⁰Ibid. p. 92.

⁶⁸¹Ibid. p. 99.

⁶⁸²Ibid. p. 100.

She repudiates the idea that Sir Robert is capable of doing a foolish or wrong thing, but he insists: 'Nobody is incapable of doing a foolish thing. Nobody is incapable of doing a wrong thing.'⁶⁸³ He summarises one of the main ideas the plays put forward:

All I do know is that life cannot be understood without much charity, cannot be lived without much charity. It is love, and not German philosophy, that is the true explanation of this world, whatever may be the explanation of the next.⁶⁸⁴

Lady Markby and Mrs. Cheveley call in search of Mrs. Cheveley's lost diamond brooch. Lady Markby shortly has to leave, but Lady Chiltern asks Mrs. Cheveley to stay. She proudly affirms to her visitor, 'I never change'.⁶⁸⁵ The conversation is heavy with irony for the audience, who know the secret:

Mrs. Cheveley:	Then life has taught you nothing?
Lady Chiltern:	It has taught me that a person who has once been guilty of a dishonest and dishonourable action may be guilty of it a second time, and should be shunned.
Mrs. Cheveley:	Would you apply that rule to every one?
Lady Chiltern:	Yes, to every one, without exception.
Mrs. Cheveley:	Then I am sorry for you Gertrude, very sorry for you. ⁶⁸⁶

Goaded too far, Mrs. Cheveley accuses Sir Robert in the presence of his wife, and leaves. Even Lady Chiltern recognises the unreality

⁶⁸³I.H., p. 100.

⁶⁸⁴Ibid. p. 101.

⁶⁸⁵Ibid. p. 125.

⁶⁸⁶Ibid. p. 125.

of the dream world she is clinging to when she cries: 'Oh, tell me it is not true! Lie to me! Lie to me! Tell me it is not true.'⁶⁸⁷ She pushes him away, clamouring for her ideal that she has lost, and Sir Robert has spirit enough to turn and accuse her:

Why can't you women love us, faults and all?
 Why do you place us on monstrous pedestals?
 We have all feet of clay, women as well as
 men; but when we men love women, we love
 them knowing their weaknesses, their follies,
 their imperfections, love them all the more
 it may be, for that reason. It is not the
 perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of
 love.⁶⁸⁸

He leaves the room accusing her of having caused his ruin.

The scenes in this play follow the same general pattern as in Lady Windermere's Fan - there Act III took place at night in Lord Darlington's rooms, with ladies hidden in terror of discovery. Here Act III moves to Lord Goring's rooms, and the hidden lady theme is much elaborated. Lord Goring is its hero: 'He is the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought.'⁶⁸⁹ He receives Lady Chiltern's letter, and when his father calls gives orders that she is to be admitted quietly. Lord Caversham is again anxious for Lord Goring to marry, but Lord Goring is only anxious for him to leave. As they go off, Mrs. Cheveley arrives, and is mistaken for the expected visitor. She finds Lady Chiltern's letter, but has to conceal herself at once. As Lord Caversham goes,

⁶⁸⁷I.H., p. 130.

⁶⁸⁸Ibid. pp. 131 - 132.

⁶⁸⁹Ibid. p. 137.

Sir Robert Chiltern arrives. Lord Goring believes Lady Chiltern is hiding in his rooms, but thinks he can solve the situation: 'No; I think I shall get through it. I'll give her a lecture through the door. Awkward thing to manage, though.'⁶⁹⁰ His conversation becomes edged with a double purpose. But Sir Robert hears a noise, and insists on searching; he finds Mrs. Cheveley, and accuses Lord Goring of Treachery, while Goring still believes his visitor is Lady Chiltern. Sir Robert leaves, and Mrs. Cheveley reveals herself.

Her latest offer is to exchange the incriminating letter against Robert Chiltern for marriage with Lord Goring. This would certainly involve Lord Goring in self-sacrifice, and he declares, 'self-sacrifice is a thing that should be put down by law.'⁶⁹¹ Mrs. Cheveley shows that her driving motive now is hatred of Lady Chiltern. Lord Goring accuses her of deliberate cruelty in taunting Lady Chiltern, and is too earnest for a dandy. She protests that she only went to the house to look for her brooch. Now the situation can be saved. Lord Goring clasps it round her arm as a bracelet, and threatens to call the police, for it is stolen. Mrs. Cheveley returns the letter, but as she goes, takes Lady Chiltern's letter to Lord Goring, written earlier, whose meaning can be misconstrued.

Next day The Times commends Sir Robert for his condemnation of the canal scheme, which he had made regardless of the consequences.

⁶⁹⁰I.H., p. 161.

⁶⁹¹Ibid. p. 177.

Lord Goring becomes engaged to Mabel Chiltern. He tells Lady Chiltern her husband is safe but that she is now in danger: as before he advises complete frankness between husband and wife, but now it is Lady Chiltern who dares not comply. Sir Robert enters with the letter and the suspense is ended, for he does not realise it was not intended for him. He reluctantly suggests he retire from public life, and Lady Chiltern eagerly agrees; although Lord Caversham arrives to offer him a seat in the Cabinet, her mind is made up. But Lord Goring shows her that she will ruin Robert's life and kill his love if she smothers his ambition; she relents, and Sir Robert accepts the post. All seems now set fair, but when Lord Goring announces his intention of marrying Mabel Sir Robert refuses his consent because of Mrs. Cheveley's presence in his rooms the night before. So in the end, as Sir Robert had to be found out, Lady Chiltern has to confess to clear Lord Goring. All is forgiven and forgotten, and Mabel announces she doesn't want Lord Goring to be an Ideal Husband, she wants to be a real wife to him. This is a gentle underlining of the 'message' of the play.

All these plays are to some extent brilliant failures. They fail most obviously because of Wilde's inability to master the language of passion. They succeed in making searching critical comments on morality. They fail, regarded as attempts to show the dandy in the world; faced with passion, with evil, or any serious moral problem the dandy either cannot cope, or ceases for the moment to be a dandy. It is only when Wilde attempts less that he achieves real success in quite a different play, The Importance

of Being Earnest. In Earnest he ceases to try to reconcile the dandy with the modern world, the moral world, and creates a magic world of inconsequence and trivia where the dandy reigns supreme, and almost all the characters share his language and his attitudes. Thus, in fact, the dandy ceases to exist, for we have seen that his strength comes from the contrast between his values and attitudes and those of a 'non-dandy' world of which he is a member. In Earnest there are no true dandies: instead there is a 'dandy' world, and certainly many remarks typical of dandies in earlier plays. If we feel that there is social criticism in Earnest, it resides in certain isolated remarks, but the play achieves perfection of form because Wilde has ceased to try to picture the 'real' world.

'There are two ways of disliking my plays. One way is to dislike them, the other is to prefer Earnest.'⁶⁹² Although Wilde was very pleased with the comedy of Earnest, there are indications in his letters that he felt that Earnest was a lesser form of art than the other plays, though incomparably more perfect on its own terms. He wrote disparagingly of this play as one which 'is quite nonsensical and has no serious interest',⁶⁹³ and implied that it might at least make money. To George Alexander he wrote: 'My play, though the dialogue is sheer comedy, and the best I have ever written, is of course in idea farcical: it could not be made part

⁶⁹²Pearson, p. 256.

⁶⁹³Letters, p. 364.

of a repertoire of serious or classical pieces',⁶⁹⁴ and there is an undertone of regret in the knowledge that 'sheer comedy' was what he was best at. He never quite lost this attitude; in 1899 he referred to Earnest as 'so trivial, so irresponsible a comedy'.⁶⁹⁵ If further evidence is required, we need only remember the scenario of Mr. and Mrs. Daventry, submitted to George Alexander while he was writing Earnest - Wilde sees it as 'extremely strong': 'I want the sheer passion of love to dominate everything.'⁶⁹⁶

None of this is to disparage Earnest; I say it to reinforce my contention that the melodramatic plots of the other comedies had in fact a serious moral intention, and that in those plays there is not so much an opposition of dialogue and plot as of prigs and dandies in the characterisation. These difficulties fall away with Earnest - it is the epitome of 'harmony; dandy speaks to dandy, lover to lover, ingénue to ingénue. And Wilde began frankly to enjoy Earnest for its own sake: he said it was 'written by a butterfly for butterflies',⁶⁹⁷ and certainly he enjoyed writing it, and mocking in the process his own more serious and less successful works. As he said in an interview with Robert Ross, the philosophy of the play is 'That we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.'⁶⁹⁸ the philosophy of the dandy. But when the

⁶⁹⁴Letters, p. 369: cf. also p. 359.

⁶⁹⁵Ibid. p. 780.

⁶⁹⁶Ibid. p. 361.

⁶⁹⁷Ibid. p. 382.

⁶⁹⁸Pearson, p. 254.

dandy is so completely in his own world and has no dull and serious people to show up, it is the world rather than the dandy that captures the attention. And although Algernon often makes dandyish remarks, the characters on the whole are not dandies: they are simply brilliantly inconsequential, bent on taking serious things lightly, and trivial things seriously; that is their world.

Earnest is a joke which Wilde enjoyed as much as his audience, and often it is a joke against himself. All the serious 'problems' of the other plays recur, only to be laughed off the stage; many character types similarly recur with a basic difference that shatters the image. Lady Bracknell is a development and a parody of the other dowagers: her sentiments are often rather too flippant and self-conscious, but the character is sustained by a brilliant use of circumlocution; her injunction to Jack, 'Rise, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture. It is most indecorous',⁶⁹⁹ is justly famous. In like terms she relates a painful story and makes a serious charge later in the play:

Come here, Prism! Where is that baby? Twenty-eight years ago, Prism, you left Lord Bracknell's house, Number 104 Upper Grosvenor Street, in charge of a perambulator that contained a baby of the male sex. You never returned. A few weeks later, through the elaborate investigations of the Metropolitan police, the perambulator was discovered at midnight standing by itself in a remote corner of Bayswater. It contained the manuscript of a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality. But the baby was not there. Prism! Where is that baby?⁷⁰⁰

⁶⁹⁹I.B.E., p. 38.

⁷⁰⁰Ibid. p. 175.

The comic effect here rises from the longwinded manner and pedantic terminology as well as from the ludicrous tale, from her care for detail about the address and her criticism of the novel at such a time.

Gwendolen is a magnificent caricature of the 'good woman'. She utters the same kind of principles, with a difference. Sometimes they are of an utterly trivial nature:

We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits, I am told; and my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest.⁷⁰¹

This ideal is hardly less rational than the wilder flights of Lady Windermere or Lady Chiltern, but in ceasing to point a definite critical reaction to them, Wilde has succeeded in showing their ridiculous nature. Elsewhere, Gwendolen's high ideals are subjected to Wilde's favourite device, the omission of the expected phrase:

Ernest, we may never be married. From the expression on mama's face I fear we never shall. Few parents nowadays pay any regard to what their children say to them . . . But although she may prevent us from becoming man and wife, and I may marry some one else, and marry often, nothing that she can possibly do can alter my eternal devotion to you.⁷⁰²

Gwendolen is perfectly balanced by Cecily: both young girls, they are shown as differing in character, in part, perhaps because of Gwendolen's society life and Cecily's country background, but

⁷⁰¹I.B.E., p. 32.

⁷⁰²Ibid. p. 58.

ultimately we work backwards and decide that the difference is because Gwendolen is to marry the more serious Jack, and Cecily the irresponsible Algy.

None of the characters, not even Algernon, can rightly be called a dandy - they are special creatures of a special world. The harmony of this world is often expressed in balance: two men who are and are not called Ernest, two girls to love them, two threatened broken engagements; the romances run parallel throughout, and each enriches the comedy of the other. When both girls find they have been deceived about the true names of their loved ones, the dialogue runs as follows:

Gwendolen: But we will not be the first to speak.

Cecily: Certainly not.

Gwendolen: Mr. Worthing, I have something very particular to ask you. Much depends on your reply.

Cecily: Gwendolen, your common sense is invaluable. Mr. Moncrieff, kindly answer me the following question. Why did you pretend to be my guardian's brother?

Algernon: In order that I might have an opportunity of meeting you.

Cecily: (to Gwendolen): That certainly seems a satisfactory explanation, does it not?

Gwendolen: Yes, dear, if you can believe him.

Cecily: I don't. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer.

Gwendolen: True. In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing. Mr. Worthing, what explanation can you offer to me for pretending to have a brother? Was it in order that you might have an opportunity of coming up to town to see me as often as possible?

Jack: Can you doubt it, Miss Fairfax?

Gwendolen: I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. This is not the moment for German scepticism.⁷⁰³

Apart from the identical nature of the love affairs at this point, the comedy arises from the contrast between the convictions the girls voice and their sentiments shown in their actions. They will not speak - and they immediately do: they have been cruelly betrayed - they disbelieve the excuses, but quash their disbelief by an effort of will.

The same quality of contrast is present in the earlier disagreement between Gwendolen and Cecily, when they find out they are both engaged to the same man:

Gwendolen: If the poor fellow has been entrapped into any foolish promise I shall consider it my duty to rescue him at once, and with a firm hand.

Cecily: Whatever unfortunate entanglement my dear boy may have got into, I will never reproach him with it after we are married.

Gwendolen: Do you allude to me, Miss Cardew, as an entanglement? You are presumptuous. On an occasion of this kind it becomes more than a moral duty to speak one's mind. It becomes a pleasure.

Cecily: Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Ernest into an engagement? How dare you? This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade.

Gwendolen: I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different.⁷⁰⁴

Here the balance in the dialogue is enriched by the contrast of the supposedly naive simplicity of Cecily, and the town sophistication of Gwendolen, who sounds at moments alarmingly like her mother.

⁷⁰⁴I.B.E., pp. 123 - 124.

Again, in the strife between Gwendolen and Cecily we find a triumph of dramatic preparation: in Act I when Jack and Algernon discuss the future relations of Gwendolen and Cecily, we find:

Jack: Cecily and Gwendolen are perfectly certain to be extremely great friends. I'll bet you anything you like that half an hour after they have met, they will be calling each other sister.

Algernon: Women only do that when they have called each other a lot of things first.⁷⁰⁵

But the whole play is a triumph of dramatic preparation: the seeds of every development are sown in Act I. In particular we are prepared for Merriman's entrance in Act II:- 'Mr. Ernest Worthing has just driven over from the station. He has brought his luggage with him',⁷⁰⁶ a line which on the opening night was received with gales of laughter that stopped the play for some minutes. The audience anticipates the new development; they feel that it can't really happen, but at the same time know with delighted certainty that it is going to. This feeling of foreknowledge is a particularly skilful way of ensuring that the audience identifies itself with the gently-mad world of the play. Algernon's entry as Ernest again builds up the preparation for the famous appearance of Jack a few minutes later, in deepest mourning for his dead, imaginary brother, being impersonated at that moment in the rose garden.

⁷⁰⁵I.B.E., p. 55.

⁷⁰⁶Ibid. p. 75.

Characteristic situations of the 'problem' plays arise in this new atmosphere, miraculously transformed. There is the question of Jack's cigarette case in Act I, reminiscent of the incriminating fan left in Lord Darlington's rooms, and the stolen diamond brooch with which Lord Goring saves Sir Robert Chiltern. Jack's character and duplicity are unmasked as a result, as Sir Robert's was in An Ideal Husband. Miss Prism's guilty past rises up to confront her, and here Wilde really revenges himself for his own ineptitude at writing scenes of high passion. We recall the embarrassing scene in A Woman of No Importance where Gerald urges his mother to marry Lord Illingworth, with all its stilted, lifeless language:

You are my mother and my father all in one.
I need no second parent. It was for you I
spoke, for you alone. Oh, say something, mother.
Have I but found one love to lose another?
Don't tell me that. O mother, you are cruel. 707

Wilde has his revenge for all the lines he could not write in Jack's reaction to Lady Bracknell's revelation about Miss Prism:

Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious
blow. But after all, who has the right to cast
a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot
repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why
should there be one law for men, and another for
women? Mother, I forgive you. 708

The success of Earnest is unchallenged: it is the creation of an artificial world. Compared with the first three comedies, it abdicates social aims and concentrates on stylistic perfection. Earnest is the counterpart of Salome in a very different manner: its success depends on sustaining the mood, and the play is a chef d'oeuvre of style.

707 W.N.I., pp. 172 - 173.

708 I.B.E., p. 180.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A Conclusion: Two Poems

There is a natural temptation to end a survey of Wilde's work with some general conclusions, a restatement and re-emphasis of the traits most remarked in his work. But in Wilde's case to summarise is almost certainly to over-simplify and to falsify, because of the breadth and diversity of his mind and his artistic productions. We have noticed in many places a pre-occupation with form, an extreme individualism and a delight in a kind of art which is as far removed as possible from realism, and is unconcerned with life. We have also found a tendency to examine the relations of art and life, and a constant hint of uneasiness about the consequences of his own attitude to art, and in particular a nagging consciousness that complete absorption in art excludes that concern for one's fellow men which is necessary to the maturity of any sensitive man, especially to the artist. In order not to over-emphasise one side of this duality at the expense of the other, I wish to end this survey of Wilde's work with an examination of two poems which by themselves can be taken to represent the opposite poles of his thought. It would be misleading to close an account of Wilde's creative work without noticing his achievements in poetry. The early poems, although often attractive, are slight and derivative, but there are two later works, each of which he composed with great care, and each of which has outlived the ephemeral reputation of the early poems. The Sphinx and The Ballad of Reading Gaol are the works on which Wilde's poetic reputation must depend.

The Sphinx is the quintessence of art for art's sake: it shows⁷ an all-consuming love of beauty, with a craving, typical of many French poets, for the new and the strange, and the complete subordination of life to art. The poem is typified by the strange monster which is its subject; a statue, not a living thing, an artificial creation, half woman, half animal, a thing of mystery, a subject for reverie. In sharp contrast is The Ballad of Reading Gaol, where the object of attention is the condemned man, a living creature, the first of Wilde's characters taken directly from life, a man involved in a human tragedy which actually occurred, and the poem is thus, of all Wilde's works, the nearest to life. It shows a consciousness of sorrow, suffering and sin, a recognition of the collective responsibility of Man for the misery of men, a repetition of the declaration of De Profundis: 'Whatever happens to another happens to oneself.' To avoid overstatement it therefore seems wisest to conclude with a study of these two poems, so that we realise once again the diversity of Wilde's mind.

The Sphinx, with Salome the most complete and perfect work of Wilde's aestheticism - one might say of his decadence, is an attempt to parallel or surpass in English the French writers of the decadence. Gautier, Baudelaire, Flaubert and Huysmans all share characteristics found in the poem, particularly the sensuous enjoyment of words and the creative and suggestive manner of using them. Wilde might be called, as Gautier was, 'the Sultan of the epithet'.

Certainly the inspiration of the manner of the poem is French: there is nothing like it in English. Although some critics have

suggested the influence of Poe's The Raven, the technique of The Sphinx is more subtle, and the subject more sensuous - the mood is that of the decadence: 'The aim of art is simply to create a mood'.⁷⁰⁹ In The Sphinx Wilde seeks to realise the ideal of literature that he describes in The Critic as Artist:

Words have not merely music as sweet as that of viol and lute, colour as rich and vivid as any that makes lovely for us the canvas of the Venetian or the Spaniard, and plastic form no less sure and certain than that which reveals itself in marble or in bronze, but thought and passion and spirituality are theirs also, are theirs indeed alone.⁷¹⁰

In his critical work, Wilde's ideals of art are often, overtly or by implication, descriptions of French masterpieces: this is part only of his reverent account of Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal:

Read the whole book, suffer it to tell even one of its secrets to your soul, and your soul will grow eager to know more, and will feed upon poisonous honey, and seek to repent of strange crimes of which it is guiltless, and to make atonement for terrible pleasures that it has never known.⁷¹¹

The inspiration, then, is French, and the choice of subject is masterly: although Flaubert in La Tentation de Saint Antoine and Baudelaire in Les Fleurs du Mal had expressed some of the fascination of the Sphinx, it was left for Wilde, as Professor Kermode points out, to make the Sphinx an important 'romantic image'. The Sphinx with its 'curved archaic smile' is the ideal symbol of

⁷⁰⁹Intentions, p. 183.

⁷¹⁰Ibid. p. 124.

⁷¹¹Ibid. p. 172.

the unknown; its age, its strange beauty and its secrecy combine to make it the great enigma, the symbol of the unknown. So it appears briefly in La Tentation, the subject of fascination for the subtle, darting Chimera, representing the quicksilver quality, the movement of man's soul. The same type of fascination with the unknowable is evident in Baudelaire's obsession with cats:

Quand mes yeux, vers ce chat que j'aime,
Tirés comme par un aimant,
Se retournent docilement
Et que je regarde en moi-même.

Je vois avec étonnement
Le feu de ses prunelles pâles,
Clairs fanaux, vivantes opâles,
Qui me contemplant fixement.⁷¹²

For the writer who wishes to explore the secret places of the soul, no symbol has greater suggestiveness. Wilde's doctrine of the supremacy of art is expressed in such a way as to make this art's greatest virtue:

There is no passion that we cannot feel,
no pleasure that we may not gratify, and
we can choose the time of our initiation and
the time of our freedom also. Life! Life!
Don't let us go to life for our fulfilment or
our experience. It is a thing narrowed by
circumstances, incoherent in its utterance,
and without that fine correspondence of form
and spirit which is the only thing that can
satisfy the artistic and critical temperament.⁷¹³

His fundamental desire artistically was to create works such as he describes. It is this achievement that made Baudelaire for Wilde one of the greatest of all poets: 'There must be no mood with which

⁷¹²Les Fleurs du Mal, LI, 'Le Chat'.

⁷¹³Intentions, p. 173.

one cannot sympathise, no dead mode of life that one cannot make alive.⁷¹⁴ The passage in Les Fleurs du Mal which most nearly approximated both in style and subject to Wilde's poem is another of Baudelaire's 'cat' poems:

Ils prennent en songeant les nobles attitudes
Des grands sphinx allongés au fond des solitudes,
Qui semblent s'endormir dans un rêve sans fin;
Leurs reins féconds sont pleins d'étincelles magiques,
Et des parcelles d'or, ainsi qu'un sable fin,
Étoilent vaguement leurs prunelles mystiques.⁷¹⁵

Wilde's description of the young dandy Wainwright brings in an interesting reference connecting the subject, the kind of art, and the French influences:

Like Baudelaire he was extremely fond of cats, and with Gautier, he was fascinated by that 'sweet marble monster' of both sexes that we can still see at Florence and in the Louvre.⁷¹⁶

The poem is the supreme example of Wilde's love of words, and the inspiration he draws from them; it is a weird fantasy, whose atmosphere is created partly by the skilful use of fairly common words, which we shall consider in a moment, and partly by the introduction of mysterious, exotic, unknown words and proper names rooted in unknown antiquity. Thus we have in the rhyme words alone such combinations as 'Labyrinth-plinth', 'corridors-Mandragores', 'skiffs-glyphs', 'bar-lupanar', 'car-nenuphar', 'corybants-elephants', 'steatite-chrysolite', 'with-monolith', 'burnous-thews' and 'porphyry-thee'. The use of strange proper names is even more striking: 'Hieroglyphs-Hippogriffs', 'catafalque-Amenalk', 'sarcophagus-Tragelaphos', 'splashed-Pasht', 'talc-Oreichalch'. In fact this use of outlandish words by itself might seem enough to condemn the poem

⁷¹⁴Intentions, pp. 178 - 179.

⁷¹⁵Les Fleurs du Mal, LXVI, 'Les Chats'. Cf. Hartley, p. 64.

⁷¹⁶Intentions, p. 68.

as ridiculous, but the technique by which Wilde manages to 'get away with' such words, indeed to use them to advantage, is masterly.

The poem is composed in thirteen sections or verse paragraphs of varying length, in a two line stanza form with interior rhyme. Its theme concerns the strange erotic dreams aroused in a young student by the Sphinx, perhaps a statuette, in his room. She fascinates him by her immobility, the suggestion that his fancy builds round her. He dreams of the events she may have seen, the strange lovers she has had. He decides that the great Egyptian god Ammon was her lover, and bids her find his dead remains and resurrect them with love. He wishes her to go in any case - perhaps to find new loves with wild beasts; he becomes more and more insistent, for she wakes in him 'each bestial sense' and makes him 'what I would not be'.⁷¹⁷ He turns to his crucifix with dull despair.

The success of the poem is wholly dependent on its technique, which never falters; it is the most subtly wrought work Wilde ever created. One basic technique is that of contrast: there is contrast everywhere. The first description emphasises the contrast of the motionless Sphinx with the dizzily moving world:

Inviolatē and immobīlē she does not rise she does not stir
For silver moons are naught to her and naught to her the
 suns that reel.
Red follows grey across the air, the waves of moonlight
 ebb and flow
But with the dawn she does not go and in the night-time
 she is there.

718

She represents something unchanging and unchangeable, in comparison with which the suns 'reel': she is timeless and her mystery is the ultimate challenge;

717 Poems, p. 309.

⁷¹⁸Ibid. p. 289.

Dawn follows Dawn and Nights grow old and all the while
Lies couching on the Chinese mat with eyes of satin
this curious cat
rimmed with gold.

Her age and the poet's youth are vividly contrasted:

A thousand weary centuries are thine while I have hardly seen
Some twenty summers cast their green for Autumn's gaudy
liveries. 719

The most striking use of contrast is in textures; we have already seen that the Sphinx has 'eyes of satin rimmed with gold'. But we can never finally decide on the appearance of the Sphinx; at first she has 'soft and silky fur', 'claws of yellow ivory' and 'heavy velvet paws', but later she is told to find a lion for her paramour:

Couch by his side upon the grass and set your white teeth
in his throat
And when you hear his dying note lash your long flanks of
polished brass

Likewise with the tiger:

And toy with him in amorous jests, and when he turns,
O smite him with your jasper claws! and bruise him with
your agate breasts!⁷²⁰

The contrast of textures is a constant feature of the poem, and there is particular concentration on metals and precious stones: 'Did gilt-scaled dragons writhe and twist with passion as you passed them by?' The Sphinx meets a 'swarthy Ethiop whose body was of polished jet'. Another possible lover is 'Some Nereid coiled in amber form with curious rock crystal breasts'. The god Ammon has 'marble limbs', but:

His thick soft throat was white as milk and threaded with
thin veins of blue:
And curious pearls like frozen dew were brodered on his
flowing silk.⁷²¹

719 Poems, p. 291.

720 Ibid. p. 306.

721 Ibid. p. 300.

The final contrast is the student's revulsion from the Sphinx, and his return to his crucifix. This rather reluctant return from dream to reality is symbolic of much of Wilde's art: he finds bizarre beauty in his quest of the Sphinx, but begins to feel repulsion: there is a conflicting inclination. Even in repulsion he feels the strange beauty of the Sphinx:

Your eyes are like fantastic moons that shiver in some
stagnant lake,
Your tongue is like a scarlet snake that dances to
fantastic tunes,⁷²²

but there is corruption in absorption in the beauty: 'You wake in me each bestial sense, you make me what I would not be'. This is the characteristic withdrawal, in a way similar to the themes of the Tales, where love of beauty is found to corrupt, but here it seems far more formal. The demand for contrast occasions the return to the crucifix,

Whose pallid burden, sick with pain, watches the world
with wearied eyes,
And weeps for every soul that dies, and weeps for every
soul in vain.⁷²³

It is a formal pattern, rather than a deep conviction.

Perhaps because of its exotic terminology, there is very little striking imagery in the poem, but one image in particular, near the beginning, is superb. It may have been suggested by an image in yet another of Baudelaire's 'cat' poems:

Et laisse-moi plonger dans tes beaux yeux,
Mêlés de métal et d'agate.⁷²⁴

But Baudelaire's image is pale compared with Wilde's. In his invocation to the Sphinx the poet cries:

Lift up your large black satin eyes which are like
cushions where one sinks!⁷²⁵

The swooning character of the poet's abandonment to his fancy is

⁷²²Poems, p. 307.

⁷²³Ibid. p. 310.

⁷²⁴Les Fleurs du Mal, XXXIV, 'Le Chat'.

⁷²⁵Poems, p. 293.

perfectly conveyed in this metaphor where he seems to penetrate sensuously right inside the beast.

The technique of the poem reveals more and more complex craftsmanship the more closely it is studied. In the first five verse paragraphs there is a particularly striking use of verbs and participles: they convey movement and vividly suggest the monstrous character of the actions: the suns 'reel'; the Asp 'coils'; the Sphinx is 'crouching'; we see the 'screaming scarlet Ibis'; a horrid dew 'dripped' from the 'moaning' Mandragores; the Sphinx 'crept' to the 'shuddering' palms; hippopotami came 'sidling'; dragons 'writhe' and 'twist'. In the next section the verbs are static, the description is conveyed in other words, and the verb 'to be' is constantly used. This change reflects and to some extent causes a change in the tempo: from frenzy and groping lust we come to a movement of the poem which is very still; the description of Ammon has a static quality, and energetic movement recurs at the end.

We see that the first part of the poem is basically concerned with demanding knowledge from the Sphinx, and the characteristic syntax is in the form of questions:

Who were your lovers? who were they who wrestled for
you in the dust?
Which was the vessel of your lust? What Leman had
you, every day?⁷²⁶

Then the poet decides that Ammon was the paramour and he is described factually:

On pearl and porphyry pedestalled he was too bright
to look upon:
For on his ivory breast there shone the wondrous
ocean-emerald. 727

The characteristic sentence form is simple statement. Finally, when

726 Poems, p. 295.

727 Ibid. p. 301.

the reaction against the vision begins, the poet employs the imperative, more and more urgently:

Get hence, you loathsome mystery! Hideous animal,
get hence!⁷²⁸

The movement is a progression through question to affirmation and hence to imperatives. 'Movement', in fact, is a particularly true description: in many ways the poem is composed like a piece of music, and Wilde described music as very similar in its effect:

Music always seems to me to produce that effect.
It creates for one, past of which one has been
ignorant, and fills one with a sense of sorrows
that have been hidden from one's tears.⁷²⁹

Wilde praised Greek literature for its appeal to the ear, 'which is really the sense which, from the standpoint of pure art, it should seek to please.'⁷³⁰ He succeeded in this poem, in spite of the bizarre nature of its subject, in finding 'the true rhythmical life of words and the fine freedom and richness of effect that such rhythmical life produces.'⁷³¹

The Sphinx is Wilde's fullest expression of his most extreme idolisation of art over life: The Ballad of Reading Gaol of all his works most strongly brings life into art, and indeed, in this poem he permitted life to spoil art, in his opinion, by an excess of propaganda. In every way it is at an opposite pole from The Sphinx: its language is almost forcedly simple, its subject taken directly from life. The Sphinx is not so much French-inspired as in a French tradition, but the Ballad has been most usefully compared with The Ancient Mariner, although in truth it stands quite alone. The two poems by themselves

⁷²⁸Poems, p. 309.

⁷²⁹Intentions, p. 104.

⁷³⁰Ibid. p. 117.

⁷³¹ Ibid. p. 118.

illustrate an astonishing versatility in Wilde's work.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol is the first of Wilde's major works where the question of literary or artistic influences is so small as to be almost negligible, and the reason for this is of course that it is the first of his major works whose inspiration is taken directly from life. For the first time he does not begin with a form but with an experience that demands expression - even with a message. He was very conscious of this and thought it a defect in the poem. The few artistic influences are unimpressive: he admits⁷³² that the phrase 'The man in red who reads one's doom' is reminiscent of Hugo in Marion Delorme: 'Voilà l'homme rouge qui passe'. His stanza form is that of Hood's Eugene Aram, to which the Ballad with very little justification has been compared. Other comparisons have been made with The Shropshire Lad, and Henley's In Hospital, but apart from a certain realism of portrayal, they are not very valuable. The most striking similarity is shown in a comparison with The Ancient Mariner, but it is a similarity of non-realism, the incident of the danse macabre of the spirits. This section of Wilde's poem has another possible echo of Coleridge in the reference to the fatal game of dice:

'Oho!' they cried, 'the world is wide,
But fettered limbs go lame!
And once, or twice, to throw the dice
Is a gentlemanly game,
But he does not win who plays with Sin
In the secret House of Shame.'⁷³³

But it was less easy for Wilde to throw off his own accustomed romantic style than it was to resist literary influence. In itself

⁷³²Letters, p. 685.

⁷³³Poems, p. 329.

this shows that his style had become more important than literary influences, which he had been able to select at will, as he did for The Sphinx. Any major criticism of the Ballad must surely rest on this point, of which Wilde was so conscious. Although he wrote in August 1897: 'It is a new style for me, full of actuality and life in its directness of message and meaning',⁷³⁴ he was by no means entirely happy about it:

The poem suffers under the difficulty of a divided aim in style. Some is realistic, some is romantic: some poetry, some propaganda. I feel it keenly, but as a whole I think the production interesting: that it is interesting from more points of view than one is artistically to be regretted.⁷³⁵

One reason for this was the way in which he composed the poem. We can follow his method of composition for once very closely, for as he was far away from literary friends he could not, as was his custom, compose and criticise himself in conversation, but had to write and seek advice, especially from Ross and Smithers. Much of the more specifically 'romantic' writing was added to his earlier version. He began the poem in May, 1897, and in October he added this stanza for example:

It is sweet to dance to violins
When Life and Love are fair:
To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes,
Is delicate and rare:
But it is not sweet with nimble feet
To dance upon the air.⁷³⁶

He may well have gone on adding stanzas in this vein precisely because he felt too directly exposed in the realistic manner of the poem: the

⁷³⁴Letters, p. 630.

⁷³⁵Ibid. p. 654.

⁷³⁶Ibid. p. 653.

subject was 'all wrong', and the treatment 'too personal'.⁷³⁷ As he recognised, this inspiration from life and personal experience, particularly of painful experience, went against his earlier dogmas on the subject:

I, of course, feel that the poem is too autobiographical and that real experiences are alien things that should never influence one, but it was wrung out of me, a cry of pain, the cry of Marsyas, not the song of Apollo.⁷³⁸

Certainly, within the limits of this poem there are very different styles from direct, simple narration, to deeply felt philosophic inquiry, from the romantic danse macabre of the spirits to a direct cry of anger at Man's treatment of his fellow man. But the saving circumstance is in the ballad form, which by tradition can contain many strands, and the metre is one unifying principle, while the repetitions, often slightly different, echoing as refrains, again help to bind the poem together.

The poem is written with just as much skill as The Sphinx, with all its stylistic techniques similarly directed to produce an overall effect. The basic difference is that The Sphinx is by intention a poem of the decadence, an attempt to create a mood of unrest, an impression of excessive civilisation. The Ballad is a very specifically Christian poem. This is no claim as regards Wilde's own spiritual state at the time of writing, it is a description of the style, which is profoundly informed with Christian references and ideals. Early on, when he contemplated having the Ballad illustrated, Wilde wrote:

I want something curious - a design of Death and Sin walking hand in hand, very severe, and medieval.⁷³⁹

⁷³⁷Letters, p. 675.

⁷³⁸Ibid. p. 708.

⁷³⁹Ibid. p. 637.

In its simplicity and starkness, and its constant simple appeal to God the spirit of the poem is in many ways medieval.

In The Sphinx, the use of proper names was one very obvious means of conveying an exotic, mysterious background: in the Ballad they are more carefully and subtly used to provide a Christian, often a medieval background. The most common names are in fact personifications, simple allegorical figures such as Sin, Death, Lust, Gold, Hope, Fear, Terror, Love, Life and the Lord of Death. These figures are not intended to be powerful images: they convey universal realities in the poem and help to give it universal meaning. Their use is a development of the device Wilde used in the Tales, with personifications of Death and Avarice, for example, in The Young King: a device he used when investigating the secrets of the soul as opposed to the social life of man. He uses it now to give an air of universal truth to particular experience:

Each narrow cell in which we dwell
Is a foul and dark latrine,
And the fetid breath of living Death
Chokes up each grated screen,
And all, but Lust, is turned to dust
In Humanity's machine.⁷⁴⁰

Although at the end of The Sphinx the poet returns to his crucifix, it seems to be a purely formal ending. In this poem, the proper names by far the most frequent are those of God and Christ. God is named five times, and Christ, together with phrases such as Son of God, thirteen times in all. Even more telling are the other proper names, every one of them Biblical. The condemned man feels 'upon his shuddering cheek / The kiss of Caiaphas.'⁷⁴¹ Wilde explained in a

⁷⁴⁰Poems, p. 341.

⁷⁴¹Ibid. p. 319.

letter:

By 'Caiaphas' I do not mean the present Chaplain of Reading: he is a good-natured fool, one of the silliest of God's silly sheep: a typical clergyman in fact. I mean any priest of God who assists at the unjust and cruel punishments of man.⁷⁴²

The other references are all to those universally recognised as great sinners, usually sinners who have repented their sins:

And he of the swollen purple throat,
And the stark and staring eyes,
Waits for the holy hands that took
The Thief to Paradise;
And a broken and a contrite heart
The Lord will not despise.⁷⁴³

The penitent thief is a typical and ubiquely suitable comparison.

The expiation of the murderer's sin is described in these terms:

And with tears of blood he cleansed the hand,
The hand that held the steel:
For only blood can wipe out blood,
And only tears can heal:
And the crimson stain that was of Cain
Became Christ's snow-white seal.⁷⁴⁴

Cain, the first murderer, is again an ideal symbol. Wilde also employs an indirect method to refer to Christ and to sinners, and his treatment of them. Wilde's declaration of universal guilt, 'Yet each man kills the thing he loves', includes an indirect reference to the betrayal of Christ by Judas: 'The coward does it with a kiss'. There are references to Christ's Passion: in the verse 'The grey cock crew, the red cock crew' is a reminder of Peter's denial of Jesus; and the prisoners claim a symbol of the Passion in their prayer:

⁷⁴²Letters, p. 676.

⁷⁴³Poems, p. 343.

⁷⁴⁴Ibid. p. 344.

And bitter wine upon a sponge
Was the savour of Remorse.⁷⁴⁵

The penitence of Mary Magdalen is the image of the heart broken
by suffering:

And every human heart that breaks,
In prison-cell or yard,
Is as that broken box that gave
Its treasure to the Lord,
And filled the unclean leper's house
With the scent of costliest nard.⁷⁴⁶

Finally, Wilde's favourite theme of the repentance of Tannhäuser
is found here too:

For who can say by what strange way,
Christ brings His will to light,
Since the barren staff the pilgrim bore
Bloomed in the great Pope's sight?⁷⁴⁷

Throughout the poem Christian terms are used and Christian
beliefs assumed. A constant theme is prayer, with forgiveness
and redemption, and the sharp reminder that Christ came to call
not the just but sinners to repentance. There is a painful repeated
irony in the contrast between 'Christian' man and the message of Christ:

The Chaplain would not kneel to pray
By his dishonoured grave:
Nor mark it with that blessed Cross
That Christ for sinners gave,
Because the man was one of those
Whom Christ came down to save.⁷⁴⁸

The warders must not speak to the condemned man: 'What word of grace
in such a place / Could help a brother's soul?'⁷⁴⁹ The Catholic
(and in Medieval terms, universal) idea of prayer for the dead is
implied:

⁷⁴⁵ Poems, p. 328.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 343.

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 337.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 339. ⁷⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 325

They hanged him as a beast is hanged:
 They did not even toll
 A requiem that might have brought
 Rest to his startled soul.⁷⁵⁰

The doctrine of the Last Judgement is also casually accepted, 'And there, till Christ call forth the dead, / In silence let him lie'.⁷⁵¹ but in Wilde's references to Hell he clearly means the Hell on earth of prison life: twice the prisoners are referred to, 'each in his separate Hell', and he describes prisons thus:

With bars they blur the gracious moon,
 And blind the goodly sun:
 And they do well to hide their Hell,
 For in it things are done
 That Son of God nor son of Man
 Ever should look upon! ⁷⁵²

The 'philosophy' of the poem, in the lines beginning 'Yet each man kills the thing he loves', has always caused controversy as regards its interpretation. When we have established securely the Christian and even Catholic context of the poem, it is possible to interpret them at least to include the Roman Catholic doctrine of Grace, and Mortal Sin. The first statement of the 'philosophy' is difficult to paraphrase:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
 By each let this be heard,
 Some do it with a bitter look,
 Some with a flattering word.
 The coward does it with a kiss,
 The brave man with a sword!

⁷⁵⁰ Poems, p. 339.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid. p. 345.

⁷⁵² Ibid. p. 341.

Some kill their love when they are young,
 And some when they are old;
 Some strangle with the hands of Lust,
 Some with the hands of Gold:
 The kindest use a knife, because
 The dead so soon grow cold.

Some love too little, some too long,
 Some sell, and others buy;
 Some do the deed with many tears,
 And some without a sigh:
 For each man kills the thing he loves,
 Yet each man does not die.⁷⁵³

Certainly the lines are a declaration of universal guilt which makes more shocking the punishment by society of the individual murderer.

The development of the thought later gives added complexity:

But there were those amongst us all
 Who walked with downcast head,
 And knew that, had each got his due,
 They should have died instead:
 He had but killed a thing that lived,
 Whilst they had killed the dead.

For he who sins a second time
 Wakes a dead soul to pain,
 And draws it from its spotted shroud,
 And makes it bleed again,
 And makes it bleed great gout of blood,
 And makes it bleed in vain!⁷⁵⁴

These are the lines which most strongly suggest the doctrine of Mortal Sin, the sin that is so great an offence to God and Man that it kills the life of grace in the soul received at Baptism. The lines 'For he who sins a second time / Wakes a dead soul to pain', indicate that it is the sinner's own soul that is dead. In this light we could reinterpret the earlier lines, perhaps, not with this as the sole explanation, but reinforcing their complex meaning: each

⁷⁵³Poems, pp. 316 - 317.

⁷⁵⁴Ibid. p. 335.

man destroys his own soul through greed or lust or materialism.

Another occurrence of the same theme is more personal:

And all the woe that moved him so
That he gave that bitter cry,
And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats,
None knew so well as I:
For he who lives more lives than one
More deaths than one must die.⁷⁵⁵

This is the cry of the poet, of the man of imagination, but now it occurs for the first time in Wilde's work: for the first time as a poet he is writing not merely of himself and his fancies but as one sharing in the universal human predicament, and suffering far more than most because of his greater gift of imagination.

As I have said, this poem is Wilde's first with a 'message': he has to express a cry of anguish at the death of the condemned man, at the horror of capital punishment, and at the 'Hell' of prison life, and his recognition of universal guilt. Everything else is subordinate to this end. There is far more use of figurative language in this poem than in The Sphinx, but the metaphors and similes are carefully controlled to increase the horror of the things he is describing, not to divert the attention from them. There is an accumulation of 'small' metaphors, adding inexorably to the final picture:

The very mud cried out for blood
To the thirsty asphalt ring;⁷⁵⁶

So still it lay that every day
Crawled like a weed-clogged wave;⁷⁵⁷

And from all the gaol rose up a wail
Of impotent despair,
Like the sound that frightened marshes hear
From some leper in his lair.⁷⁵⁸

⁷⁵⁵ Poems, p. 333.

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 326.

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 326. ⁷⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 325

As in The Sphinx, Wilde makes strong use of simple verbal images:

With open mouth he drank the sun
As though it had been wine! 759

The brackish water that we drink
Creeps with a loathsome sline; 760

Wilde's use of colour is simple and effective: on the whole the prison world is drab and purposely colourless, and the colours that are mentioned are therefore especially vivid, for instance at the beginning of the poem:

He did not wear his scarlet coat,
For blood and wine are red,
And blood and wine were on his hands
When they found him with the dead,
The poor dead woman whom he loved,
And murdered in her bed.

He walked amongst the Trial Men
In a suit of shabby grey; 761

Grey is a typical prison colour, and the condemned man looks wistfully at the blue sky and silver clouds. A similar vivid and largely colourless effect is achieved here:

He does not wake at dawn to see
Dread figures throng his room,
The shivering Chaplain robed in white
The Sheriff stern with gloom,
And the Governor all in shiny black,
With the yellow face of Doom. 762

On the whole, the horror is not conveyed by comparisons with objects or states from the world outside the poem. Another means had to be found:

759 Poems, p. 321.

760 Ibid. p. 342.

761 Ibid. p. 315.

762 Ibid. p. 318.

The difficulty is that the objects in prison have no shape or form. To take an example: the shed in which people are hanged is a little shed with a glass roof, like a photographers studio on the sands at Margate. For eighteen months I thought it was the studio for photographing prisoners. There is no adjective to describe it. I call it 'hideous' because it became so to me after I knew its use. In itself it is a wooden, oblong, narrow shed with a glass roof.⁷⁶³

We find the key to Wilde's solution in another remark: 'The horror of prison-life is the contrast between the grotesqueness of one's aspect, and the tragedy in one's soul'.⁷⁶⁴ The prisoners are described as the 'Fool's Parade', and their grotesque appearance does indeed intensify the sense of tragedy. The simplicity of the description is deliberate, and more effective than any other style would be: Wilde emphasises the commonplace article and fills it with horror because of the use to which it is put. The emotional significance of the descriptive detail is established in this way, so that the most ordinary object is repulsive: Wilde makes the reader share his wonder at the condemned man's composure:

And twice a day he smoked his pipe,
And drank his quart of beer:
His soul was resolute, and held
No hiding-place for fear;⁷⁶⁵

Everyday detail in the next example carries the double significance of the awful monotony of prison life and the terrible significance of this particular dawn:

⁷⁶³Letters, pp. 645 - 646.

⁷⁶⁴Ibid. p. 691.

⁷⁶⁵Poems, p. 325.

At last I saw the shadowed bars,
 Like a lattice wrought in lead,
 Move right across the white-washed wall
 That faced my three-plank bed,
 And I knew that somewhere in the world
 God's dreadful dawn was red.⁷⁶⁶

The warders in their Sunday suits become figures of horror when the prisoners see 'quicklime on their boots'. The supreme example of this technique is the line, 'The hangman with his gardener's gloves'.⁷⁶⁷

The last stylistic device we shall notice is contrast, another one he used also in The Sphinx. Here is nature contrasted with the grim uses to which man puts it:

For oak and elm have pleasant leaves
 That in the spring-time shoot:
 But grim to see is the gallows-tree,
 With its adder-bitten root,
 And, green or dry, a man must die
 Before it bears its fruit!⁷⁶⁸

The next verse compares the upward striving of the materialist with the eminence of the murderer's death:

The loftiest place is that seat of grace
 For which all worldlings try:
 But who would stand in hempen band
 Upon a scaffold high,
 And through a murderer's collar take
 His last look at the sky?

Although I have frequently contrasted the Ballad with The Sphinx, in fact it stands in sharp contrast to all Wilde's other artistic works in its inspiration. It cannot, like Dorian Gray or the Tales, be described in terms of Wilde's critical theory: it disobeys his own precepts. It cannot be explained, either, solely in terms of

⁷⁶⁶Poems, p. 331.

⁷⁶⁷Ibid. p. 318.

⁷⁶⁸Ibid. p. 321.

the effect of his prison experience, but the explanation has to be looked for in the quality of unease we have found throughout, in his exposition of artistic ideas in his works. In Dorian Gray and the Tales on a spiritual level, in Dorian Gray and the comedies on a social level, he attempted to justify his theories of art and life, and in all we have found an undercurrent of profound unease. His prison experience provided a climax for his unease, and produced a new philosophy: 'Whatever happens to another happens to oneself'.⁷⁶⁹ The Individualism of De Profundis is a very watered-down affair compared with the Individualism of Intentions: Wilde's experience of suffering widened it until it was merely verbal. Individualism as described in Intentions and demonstrated in the works tends basically towards selfishness or egotism: the Individualism of De Profundis and the Ballad becomes profoundly altruistic.

The new altruism is illustrated in Wilde's attitude to prison reform, in his letters to the Daily Chronicle,⁷⁷⁰ in his pity for imprisoned children and his efforts on their behalf,⁷⁷¹ in his gifts of money to fellow prisoners as they were discharged.⁷⁷² The more personal aspect of the change is a clear sight of the bad things in his former way of life, and a recognition of the importance of suffering and the invalidity of a philosophy that studiously avoids the very idea:

My desire to live is as intense as ever, and
though my heart is broken, hearts are made to

⁷⁶⁹ Letters, p. 477.

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid. pp. 568 - 576, 722 - 726.

⁷⁷¹ Ibid. p. 554.

⁷⁷² Ibid. p. 578.

be broken: that is why God sends sorrow into the world.⁷⁷³

His declarations are often extravagant, and seem too extreme a reformation for him to live up to - and of course it is well known that he did not do so:

I am thoroughly ashamed of having led a life unworthy of an artist, and a great one. I do not interest myself in that British view of morals that sets Messalina above Sporus: both pleasures are matters of temperament, and like all sensual pleasures lack nobility and slay the soul: but my reckless pursuit of mundane pleasure, my extravagance, my senseless ease, my love of fashion, my whole attitude towards life, all these things were wrong for an artist.⁷⁷⁴

This sentiment is certainly an explicit statement of much that I have found implicit in the Tales in particular. Yet again he recognises the extremes of his former attitudes, which led, as we have already stated, both in life and in art, not to self-realisation but to self-indulgence:

I know simply that a life of definite and studied materialism, and a philosophy of appetite and cynicism, and a cult of sensual and senseless ease, are bad things for an artist: they narrow the imagination, and dull the more delicate sensibilities.⁷⁷⁵

It is not these sentiments, openly and dramatically expressed when his creative work was over, that give Wilde's work a basic strength: by themselves they would be a sad admission of the inadequacy of the beliefs and standards on which he had built his life and art. The strength comes from a mind that was fearless in defying convention whether right or wrong, and in accepting only ideas that he could personally test and approve. Even more, his strength comes from

⁷⁷³Letters, p. 621.

⁷⁷⁴Ibid. pp. 594 - 595.

⁷⁷⁵Ibid. pp. 604 - 605.

the fact that he never ceased self-examination and self-criticism in these ideas, refused to accept uncritically even his own conclusions, and uncovered their deficiencies as surely and courageously as he uncovered the deficiencies in the self-satisfied world around him.

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